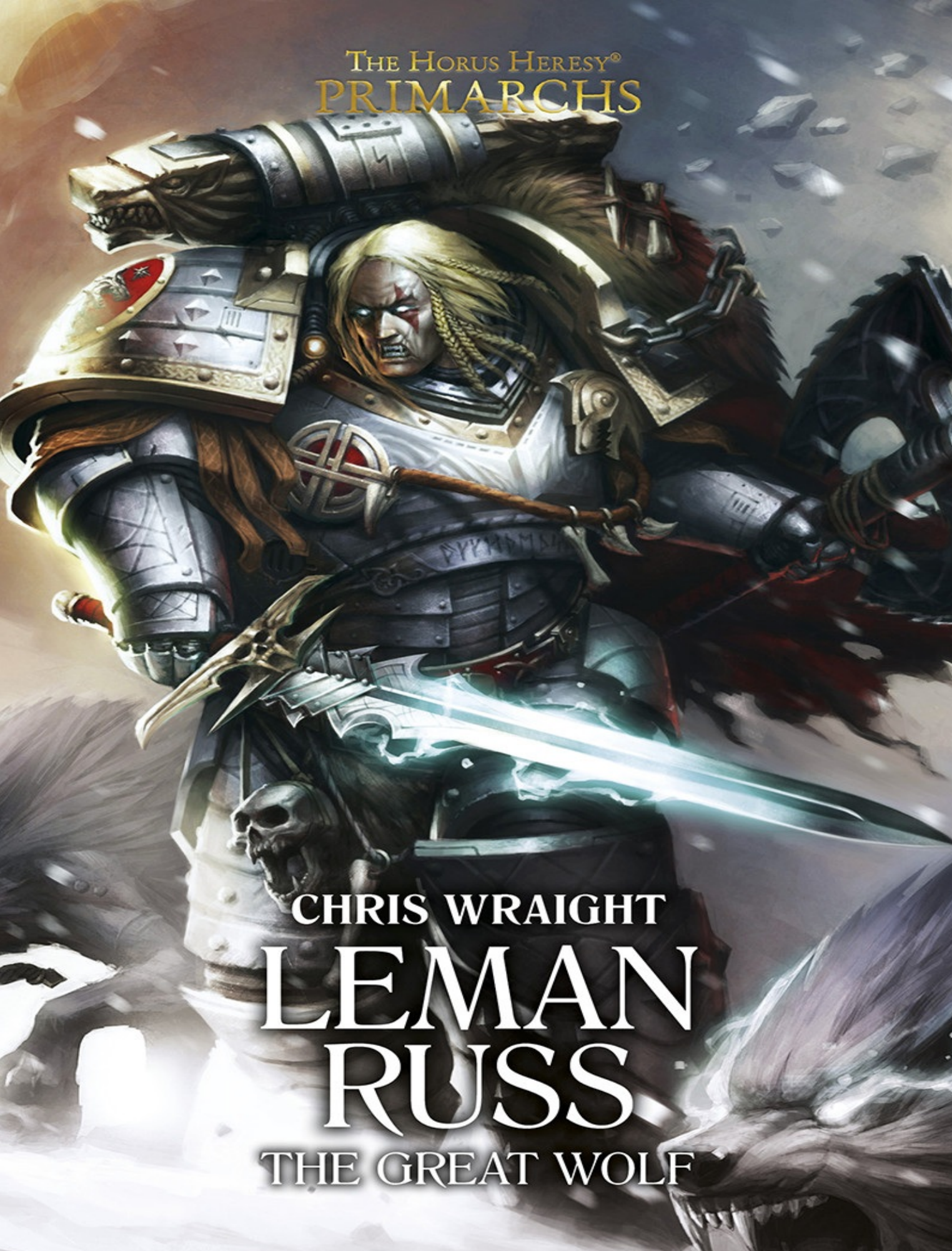
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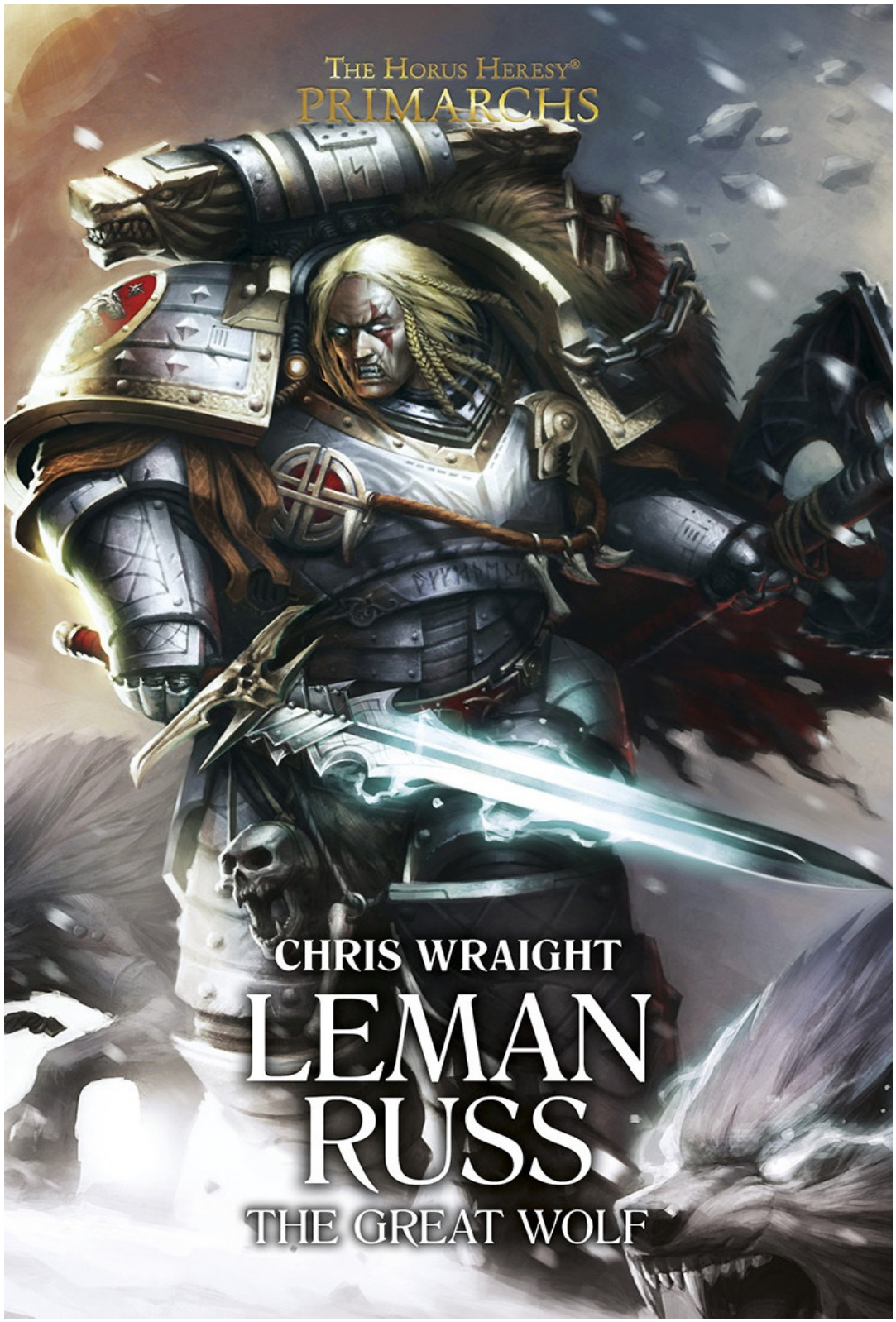
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BACKLIST

The Primarchs

CORAX: LORD OF SHADOWS

VULKAN: LORD OF DRAKES

JAGHATAI KHAN: WARHAWK OF CHOGORIS

FERRUS MANUS: GORGON OF MEDUSA

FULGRIM: THE PALATINE PHOENIX

LORGAR: BEARER OF THE WORD

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

Mighty heroes battle for the right to rule the galaxy. The vast armies of the Emperor of Mankind conquer the stars in a Great Crusade – the myriad alien races are to be smashed by his elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.

The dawn of a new age of supremacy for humanity beckons. Gleaming citadels of marble and gold celebrate the many victories of the Emperor, as system after system is brought back under his control. Triumphs are raised on a million worlds to record the epic deeds of his most powerful champions.

First and foremost amongst these are the primarchs, superhuman beings who have led the Space Marine Legions in campaign after campaign. They are unstoppable and magnificent, the pinnacle of the Emperor's genetic experimentation, while the Space Marines themselves are the mightiest human warriors the galaxy has ever known, each capable of besting a

hundred normal men or more in combat.

Many are the tales told of these legendary beings. From the halls of the Imperial Palace on Terra to the outermost reaches of Ultima Segmentum, their deeds are known to be shaping the very future of the galaxy. But can such souls remain free of doubt and corruption forever? Or will the temptation of greater power prove too much for even the most loyal sons of the Emperor?

The seeds of heresy have already been sown, and the start of the greatest war in the history of mankind is but a few years away...

I

The night was clear of cloud, lit only by a scatter of blue-white stars above the towering flanks of Krakgard. Fenris could be starkly beautiful when the mood took it, perhaps as beautiful as any world in the Imperium.

But Ove-Thost did not know of any other worlds. All he had known from birth was the bone-cracking cold, the sudden fire of the world's erupting heart, the surge and crash of ice-studded oceans, and until three days ago he had forgotten even that.

Three days ago he had been a beast, his jawline frothy with saliva. He had loped on all fours, slouching amid the grey drifts, howling his agony out into the empty skies. He had fought other beasts in that time – huge, fur-clad monsters of cave and gorge. They had ripped at his back with their claws, and he had torn at their throats with his teeth.

Ove-Thost had only blurred memories of those fights now, but retained the wounds to show for them. Bloodstains lay, speckled and frozen, across his naked muscle-mass. When he looked at those muscles now with his returning human senses, he saw hair, thick-rooted, red-crowned, thrusting out across the backs of his arms, his chest, his legs. He ran his hands, now long-nailed, over the russet mane of his neck and felt the coarse strands fight back against his fingers' tug.

Now he ran again like a man should run – two-legged, though hunched and panting. He waded in the snow, sinking knee deep, kicking it up in flurries. His breath came in wet gasps, dragged up from lungs swollen with blood, and it felt to him like burning oil.

Ove-Thost half stood. Krakgard's eastern shoulder loomed up

into the night, glowing pale blue under Valdrmani's light. The mountain edge was spiky with the black outlines of pine woods, each one thick, clinging and home to a thousand more ways to die. He peered ahead into the murk, using eyes that now saw more sharply than he could had dreamed of before taking the draught from the chalice. He sniffed, dragging air up into his nasal cavity, and identified the many separate strands of danger clustering on a raging wind.

Beyond the tree line and the pass' crown was the greatest peak of all, the Mountain, the place where he had been taken, tested and changed. All he clearly remembered of that place was the Gate, licked by fire, and then the dreams, the ones that had made him scream into the dark, all the while watched by faces, hidden faces, swathed in leather masks, their golden eyes pinning him.

He had to get back there now, out of the eternal cold, back to the fires that burned under the earth. Even in the midst of his bestial madness he had known that.

Get back.

He moved again, ignoring the jabs of pain in his calves, keeping low to the crusted snow. The pass was up above him, a soaring mass of cliffs and defiles, latticed with false trails and crevasses. The fatigue was crushing now, but he kept going, forcing cramp-tight sinews to function.

It took hours to reach the first ridge, after which he picked up speed, pushing the drifts apart with chapped hands. Valdrmani had almost set by the time he reached the apex of the pass and clapped weary eyes on the Mountain itself.

Amid the night-shadows it seemed vaster than before – an engorged outcropping of the planet's core, thrusting up, higher and higher, cloaked in ever-steepening terraces of dirty snow. The summit glowed, set against the star-flung sky with distant points of red, and the earth beneath shuddered faintly from the deep-bored

action of its immense under-engines.

The causeways were below him, driving up from the base of the valleys ahead, straight and wide. At the end of them were the Gates, crowned with stone and barred with weather-blackened iron.

But first he had to get to them. He broke into a run again, sliding and skidding amid the rime and slush. His breath came faster, his heartbeat heavy.

He smelt the pungent note of predator a microsecond too late, hidden by the gale at his face. He veered suddenly, dropping to his knees, but not fast enough, and a living wall of fur and sinew hit him from the side.

Ove-Thost crashed through the snow, tumbling. Claws raked across his back, digging in deep, and he roared with pain. He pushed back, trying to hurl the creature from him, but it was on top now, heavier than him, shaggy with a grey-flecked pelt as stiff as iron.

It went for him, opening jaws as wide as his chest. Ove-Thost caught a glimpse of three rows of teeth, then a blast of foul breath and a splatter of yellow saliva. He jerked his head to one side, heaving with his arms to push the creature off balance.

It was just enough, and the jaws snapped closed over his shoulder, not his neck. Blood fountained, gushing over both of them, drenching Ove-Thost's cheeks and mouth.

The copper stink wakened the animal rage within him again, the one that had kept him alive in the deep waste, and he roared with fury. He shoved harder, pushing the creature away and into a roll. He pushed with his cramped legs, straightening them and hauling himself over on top of the hunter.

His hands were still locked in the clawed grasp of the beast's, his body sunk into its furs, so all he had were his teeth, longer and sharper since taking the draught.

He bit down, ripping through flesh and hair, shaking his head

from side to side, bathing in the hot black rivers of blood. The thing beneath him howled, arched its back and tried to pull clear, but Ove-Thost was no longer the hunted.

The kill was made. He pulled himself up from the carcass, threw his bloody head back and howled into the night. He threw out his triumph, arms back, chest shaking from exertion, his naked flesh streaked with long lines of steaming liquid.

For a moment, he almost lost himself. Visions flashed across his fevered mind – he saw himself loping back into the woods, hunting more of the creatures that lurked there. He could join the chase forever, running under moonlight-barred snow, letting the amber-eyed presence now locked in his breast go free.

Then his kill-howl guttered out, and he toppled, dizzy from blood loss. On his knees now, he felt the animal retreat and the man return. His shoulder was a raw mass of chewed tissue – a wound he would have died from before his body had been changed, and which even now threatened to end him.

He reached out, back into the hot maw of the dead beast, and wrenched out two of its fangs, each as long as his hand, slender and wickedly curved. Grunting, he pushed them both through the lips of his wound, pinning the edges closer.

Then he stood and staggered away, leaving pooling footprints behind. His vision was edged with blurs now, shaking even as he moved. He shuddered from the cold, enduring the come-down from his animal frenzy, impelled only by the mantra he had repeated over and over in the bleak hours.

Get back.

As more hours passed, he lost the ability to guide himself. His feet dragged, his head hung low. At some point the thick carpet of snow began to feel firmer underfoot, as if stone lay beneath it, but he did not stop to check.

He fell to his knees again, shivering, and crawled. It felt like he

was going up, climbing steeply, pulling himself into the heavens themselves, where the stars wheeled and the Allfather welcomed the best fighters to His halls.

He only stopped when the night melted away before him, broken by a thin line of pearl-grey in the east, and the blue shadows shrank back. The wind fell, and the hard light of Fenris' sun bled like water into an empty sky.

He looked up and saw the Mountain before him, rising into the frigid air, immense beyond reckoning. The Gate stood just a few hundred metres distant, itself vast, many-storeyed, flanked by columns of hewn rock and surmounted by a mighty stone wolf's-head that snarled out across the causeway's approaches. Tiny-looking figures clustered at its base, each clad in battle-armour and wearing metal masks.

Ove-Thost crawled towards them, his left leg now numb and dragging, his shoulder leaking blood. They made no move to come to his aid, but watched as the distance closed. As they neared, Ove-Thost saw their pitiless faces gaze at him, their metal hands resting on the hilts of great swords and axes. Some were clad in blue-grey, others the dull sheen of bare iron, some in blackest pitch.

Each exertion was more painful than the last. The blurring of his vision grew more severe, and soon all he saw was a fog of grey. When he reached the threshold, his fingers closed over it, weakly gripping at wind-scoured stone. Only then did the giants move, reaching down to drag him to his feet, to pour hot liquid down his throat, to rip the fangs from his wound, preparing to throw them back into the wilderness.

'No,' blurted Ove-Thost, reaching out for the teeth of the beast he had slain.

He heard laughter, coarse, deeper than a man's. One of the figures, black-armoured, his eyes glowing a dull red like heart's-blood, took the two fangs back and pressed them into Ove-Thost's

calloused palms.

'Fair enough,' he said. 'You earned them.'

That was the beginning.

Years passed, and his body underwent further changes. The draught he had taken out on the eternal ice, the Canis Helix, proved to be the first of many trials. Each one that came afterwards brought fresh agony as his limbs flexed and his blood thickened, but it also made him stronger, faster, deadlier. He learned to fight in new ways, and with new weapons. Before, he might have been proud to boast of killing a man; now, he was being taught to kill hundreds, thousands, whole worlds.

He was no longer Ove-Thost, but Haldor Twinfang, and he took to the name as he took to everything in that place. He was a Blooded Claw, the rawest of the Rout, and he trained and sparred with others like him, all pulled from the tribes of the frozen seas and wrought into gods.

He saw no difference between himself and the others. He laughed with them and brawled with them, and learned which of the great weapons – axe, blade, boltgun, claws – would be his favoured. His pack formed up around him as more survived the trials: Valgarn, Eiryk, Yellowtooth, Sventr and others, all young, their skin smooth and their eyes shining. They looked up into the storm-wracked skies of the death world and saw the ships power from the landing stages at the Mountain's summit; they knew that they would be on those ships when all was done, and they yearned for it.

Brannak was Wolf Priest of Brokenlip's Great Company, and drove them all hard. At every test, at every hurdle, he was watching, arms folded, his long-handled axe, Frost, balanced under the weight of his wrists. It was he who had given Haldor the fangs back, and they now hung on cured leather strips from the Blooded

Claw's neck, jangling against the smooth grey of his armour's breastplate.

Haldor believed that Brannak paid him special attention. In times of fatigue, when he had been driven almost beyond endurance, he resented that. In other times, it fuelled a deep-set confidence, bordering on arrogance. That brought retribution from his pack-mates, who fought as hard among one another as they did with any sent against them. After the long spars, their flesh bloody, their bones cracked, they would slump around the firepits, hair lank with sweat, and forget what had started it.

'He watches everyone,' said Eiryk, grinning through a bruised mouth.

'Me more than you,' Haldor muttered. 'Me more than anyone.'

So the days passed, a procession of ice and fire, out under the sky, down in the caverns, and they grew, and they earned their scars, and the bond of the pack formed tighter.

Sventr was the first to die. Three others followed him, destroyed by the agonies of implantation failure or death in trial-combat. When the final day came, the pack was nine strong, all with the carapace in place and the link with power armour established. They were complete then, in body if not yet fully in mind. They donned helms and saw the world dissolve into runic overlays of electronic targets. They were taken to the forges of the Iron Priests and given their blades – chainswords, mostly.

When Haldor stood to receive his, Brannak handed him an axe, shorter of haft than Frost, twin-bladed and forged from a dark metal. It had no runes on the face, but two austere lines of tracery cut along the outer edges.

Haldor hefted it, finding the weight unfamiliar but agreeable. He would use it, he thought, to carve the galaxy apart.

'You know what this is named?' Brannak asked him.

Haldor looked up at him. 'Should I?'

Brannak cuffed him across the jawline, the hard crack of a warrior's fist, and Haldor's neck snapped back. 'Learn it.'

Then he moved down the line. Haldor rubbed his already-swelling cheek and looked down at the metal. It had no name that he knew of. Perhaps he would have to steal one for it.

He snatched a look at Eiryk, who was already studying his chainsword with relish.

'What now?' Haldor whispered.

Eiryk did not look at him, but ran a finger, clattering, over the honed teeth. 'We are Sky Warriors, brother,' he replied absently. 'We do what they do. We drink.'

The hall rang with voices. Some were human, though those voices were pale and thin beside the guttural roars of the transhumans, the Ascended, the demigods. Braziers glowed with coals, flaring up into blazes as the alcohol-rich *mjod* was flung across them. The air was rich, a stink of sweat and cooked meats and trodden straw.

This was deep in the Fang, enveloped within its iron-dark innards, lit from within by writhing flame, a place of snaking shadows and blood-red hearth-heat. The entire brotherhood was there, brawling and gorging under the sight of their jarl, Aeska Brokenlip, once warrior of Tra of the VI Legion, now Wolf Lord of the Third Great Company of the Space Wolves Chapter. The galaxy had changed since the breaking of the Siege, even in the halls of Fenris, but much remained the same.

Aeska's Wolf Guard sat with him at the stone-hewn high table, scrabbling across food boards for fat-rich intestines. They raised gold-chased drinking horns, chucking oily liquid down hoarse throats. They chanted the old songs of the Legion, the ones that had been sung on the ice world since before the Allfather had come, and which would be sung there after the last star was extinguished.

They wore armour, for this was a day of marking, of celebrating the raw strength of what had been dragged out of the galactic cataclysm and which now had borne fresh shoots, green like spear-thorns after the winter. They also wore furs, sticky with spillage, the trophies of the slain taken out in the wilderlands.

Haldor sat with his pack of Blooded Claws, the neophytes of the company, though on this day they had been given the place of honour below the high table. Eiryk was on his left, his face flushed, Valgarn on his right. It might have been any feast on any wood-built jarl's-hall in the midst of the high summer, with horns raised to honour the slain and goad the living.

Only after many hours did Brokenlip at last rise from his throne, shaking rust-brown hides from his shoulders, and the tide of noise shuddered into silence.

Aeska's face was scarred down the right-hand side, making the skin pale and puckered. One eye was augmetic, a ring of scratched metal bolted onto his skull; one hand was bionic. There were rumours that he had been taken from Yarant barely alive, his thread a second from being cut clean. He was one of the few, the ones who had stood beside Russ in the Age of Wonder, when all was new and the towers of the Imperium were first raised, and so when he spoke, even the Claws listened.

The Wolf Lord lifted a drinking-horn clutched in a gnarled, ring-studded fist.

'*Heilir, Fenryka,*' he growled, and his voice ran across the stone flags like wildfire kindling. 'Come in peace to this hearth.'

The greeting was as old as the bones of the world, and all raised their own drinks in response, saluting their warlord.

'We have come here under stone since Ogvai was jarl,' Aeska said, 'to mark victory, to mark defeat, to blood the newcomers, to let our long-fangs beckon death a little closer.'

Coarse chuckles ran around the room.

‘Yet this is the first night of a new age. These Claws who take their step into the Rout are the first to know nothing but new ways. All others here joined a Legion. They join a Chapter. They are our future.’ Brokenlip switched his heavy gaze to Haldor’s table, where it alighted on him above all. ‘Allfather preserve us.’

Haldor held that gaze, not even acknowledging to himself how hard it was to meet the eyes of one who had fought for so long, so hard, against an enemy that even all these years after his final defeat still seemed as present as the dark on a fire’s edge.

Brokenlip drew his blade – a great broadsword with a dragon’s neck snaking along the serrated edge. He angled it towards the Claws, dipping it in salute.

‘The enemy will return,’ he said, his voice a low snarl that snagged like claws across hide. ‘Fight it. Throttle it. Cast it down, just like we made you to do.’

The company clambered to their feet, shoving aside heavy wooden boards and reaching for chainswords, axes, longswords, mauls. All were held aloft, casting shadows of murder across the faces of the new recruits.

‘When you came here, this was my hearth,’ said Aeska, his pitted lips cracking into a fang-bared grimace, or perhaps a smile. ‘Now it is yours. Defend it with your lives.’

They all cried aloud then, a fierce wall of sound that made the stone shiver and the flames shake.

‘Vlka Fenryka!’

Before he knew what he was doing, Haldor had seized his axe. His pack had taken their own weapons, and they slid from battle-worn scabbards in a ripple of dry hisses.

‘Fenrys!’

All of them were shouting now, summoning up spirits of war and rage, fuelled by the punishing quantities of mjod coursing around their genhanced systems. The fires seemed to rear up, swelling

within iron cages, pushing back the Mountain's eternal gloom.

Haldor was no different.

'Fenrys hjolda!'

The massed roars echoed back from the high chamber roof. Long Fang and Blooded Claw, Grey Hunter and Wolf Guard, the old names and the new, all became one voice amid the flames and the war-cries, bonded by the shared howl like the wolf packs of the outer wilds.

And then the thunder broke, replaced by the hard-edged, deep-timbre laughter of warriors. The weapons were stowed, the drinking-horns reached for. Brannak swaggered over to the Claws' table, his thick voice blurred by mjod, starting to tell the tales that would carry on far into the night. They would recite sagas now, all the grizzled warlords, reciting old records of old wars scattered far across the sea of stars. Every feast ended with this, the skjalds and the jarls remembering, for this was how annals were made on Fenris.

Throughout it all, Aeska kept his eyes fixed on Haldor. Once the last of the war-cries had faded, the Blooded Claw looked away from the high table, suddenly uncomfortable. He pushed his way from the bench, sending boards laden with raw meat thudding to the floor.

Eiryk looked back at him, his face mottled, eyes narrow with mirth. 'Too rich for you, brother?' he asked.

Haldor spat on the floor. He was fine. He was more than fine – he was bursting with life, his every muscle burning for the coming test of true combat.

Aeska's words echoed in his mind, though. *They are our future*.

'Listen to the old man's stories,' Haldor told him, holding up his empty drinking-horn. 'I thirst.'

He strode off, hearing Brannak's voice raised in declamation behind him.

‘And the sky cracked, and the ice broke, and the Allfather came to Fenris, and Russ, war-girt, went to meet Him, and they fought, and the earth was lain waste, and the stars shivered out...’

Haldor shoved through the press of bodies, making his way towards the far gates of the hall. As he neared the great vats of heated mjod, as thick and viscous as unrefined promethium, a chill wind sighed through the open arches. Beyond those arches, empty corridors snaked away into the heart of the Mountain, unlit and cold, burrowing ever deeper. He looked at them, and they looked back at him.

Haldor turned on the threshold and saw his battle-brothers celebrating. Thralls scuttled across the floor, veering around the giants with silent skill, carrying more fuel for the revels.

This was his world now, his hearth to guard.

He slipped out under the nearest arch. The air temperature soon dropped away to the hellish default, and the last of the firelight flickered into nothing.

Haldor pressed himself against frigid stone, rough-cut and slick with ice. He took in a deep breath, enjoying the searing cold in his lungs. The dark pressed around him, just as it had in the forests of Asaheim, blue-black, vengeful.

Then he was moving again, loping like he had done before, deeper down. He did not know all the ways of the Mountain yet. Perhaps no Sky Warrior did, for the fortress was never more than a fraction full. The great bulk of the Chapter was forever at war, coming back to the home world only for feasts or councils, and in any case the place had been intended for a Legion.

He went on, further away, deeper down. The echoes of mortal voices died away entirely, replaced by the almost imperceptible rhythm of the deep earth. Ice cracked endlessly, ticking like a chrono in the dark. Meltwater, formed over buried power lines, trickled across broken stone before freezing again in swirling

patterns below. From the great shafts came the half-audible growls of the massive reactors tended by the Iron Priests, and the eternal forges that created the Chapter's weapons of war, and, so he had heard tell, the forgotten halls where the eldest of all dwelt, their hearts locked in ice and their minds kept in a stasis of dreams.

By then he had no idea where he was going, nor why, only that the shadows were welcome, and for the moment he had no need of fire to warm his hearts nor more flesh to fill his innards. He had been changed, and his body embraced the crippling cold where once it would have killed him, and he welcomed it.

Then he froze, and the hairs on the back of his arms lifted. Soundlessly, swift as a thought, he reached for the haft of the axe bound at his belt.

The corridor ahead was as dark and empty as all the others, rising slightly and curving to the left. Haldor narrowed his gaze, but the shadow lay heavy, and nothing broke the gloom.

Something was there, up ahead, out of visual range but detectable all the same. A pheromone, perhaps, or the ghost of a scent. Haldor dropped low and crept forwards, keeping the haft gripped loose. The tunnels of the Fang were full of dangers, all knew that. He became painfully aware of how noisy his armour was, and how much stealthier he could be without it.

He reached the curve ahead and passed around it. The change in the air told him the corridor had opened out, but the dark was now unbroken. He could hear something out there – breathing, like an animal's, soft and low – but could not pin it down. He crouched, shifting the weight of the axe, readying to move.

Before he could do anything more, a voice came out of the darkness, deeper than any animal's, rimed with age.

'Put the axe down, lad.'

Haldor had obeyed before he even knew it, bound by a gene-heritage that was older than he was. Suddenly, the pall seemed to

shift, and a figure loomed up through the Fang's under-murk. For a moment, all Haldor saw was a figment of old race-nightmares – a daemon of the darkling woods, crowned with branches, eyes as blue as sea-ice and hands like the gnarled roots of trees.

But then he was looking into features he knew as well as his own, despite never having seen them in flesh and blood. The face was smeared with ashes, a daub-pattern of black on pale skin. A heavy mantle of furs hung over hunched shoulders, and a gunmetal-grey gauntlet clutched at the hilt of a heavy, rune-encrusted longsword.

Instantly, without being bidden, Haldor dropped to one knee.

'Enough of that,' said his primarch, testily. 'Why are you here?'

Haldor didn't know. Aeska's words had driven him out, and the cold had sucked him in, but that was all he understood. Perhaps it had been the drink, or perhaps the last chance to walk the silent depths before war called, or maybe the tug of fate.

Now he stood, alone, in the presence of the Lord of Winter and War.

'One of Aeska's whelps,' said Leman Russ, drawing closer, his strange eyes shining in the dark. 'No wonder you left the hall. Bloody sagas. I've heard them all.'

Haldor couldn't tell if he was jesting. 'They told of the All-father,' he said, hesitantly, wary of the danger in the primarch's every move. Russ was like a blackmane, huge, unpredictable, bleeding with danger. 'They said you fought Him. The only time you lost.'

Russ barked out a laugh, and the fur mantle shook. 'Not the only time.' He shrank back into the shadows then, seeming to diminish a fraction, but the danger remained.

Haldor caught snatched glimpses of his master's garb. Not the heavy armour plate of the warrior-king, but layers of hard-spun wool, streaked with the charcoal of spent embers. They were the

clothes of death rites, of mourning. Some warrior of the Aett, perhaps even the *Einherjar,* must have been slain, though it was unusual for the Wolf Priests not to have called out the names of the dead through the Chapter.

Russ noticed the weapon Haldor had placed back at his belt, and looked at it strangely. 'You know what blade that is?' he asked.

Haldor shook his head, and Russ snorted in disgust.

'The gaps grow, holes in the ice, greater with every summer-melt,' the primarch said. 'You know nothing. They remember nothing.'

Russ trailed off, half turning back towards the dark. Haldor said nothing. His hearts were both beating, a low thud, an instinctive threat-response even when no blades were raised.

'I know not whether you were sent to mock me or bring me comfort,' Russ said at last, 'but sent you were. So listen. Listen and remember.'

Haldor stayed where he was, not daring to move, watching the huge, fur-clad outline under the Mountain's heart. Russ was speaking like a skjald.

'I fought the Allfather, that is true, and He bested me, for the gods themselves fear Him, mightiest of men. But that was not the only time.'

The eyes shone, points of sapphire, lost in the grip of ice-shadow.

'There was another.'

II

The last Faash hunter-killer ran out into open void, pirouetting through exploding outrigger spokes before ducking under the reeling shadow of the bastion station. Free of the tumbling debris, it straightened, firing thrusters to align with the Ynniu System's solar plane, then boosted clear towards the heliopause.

Behind it, the orbital bastion imploded and crumpled, smashed in on itself by the hammering thunder of void-launched mass drivers. Surrounding warships pulled steadily clear of the gathering cataclysm, all liveried in the dark grey of the VI Legion, all maintaining their fire as they moved in concert.

The station had once been massive, a huge dagger-edged column of steel and carbon synthate orbiting Ynniu III, stocked with gunnery bays filled with interference weaponry and nine battalions of Faash Scarabines. Such concentrated power did not fall into ruin lightly – it had taken two weeks for the Wolves of Dekk-Tra to clear the void-runs to Ynniu III, a further six days to deplete the reactor-backed aegis shield, and only then had the killers of the Rout gone in. Six hours they had taken to reach the bastion's inner command coil, two more to destroy the residual Scarabine suicide guard units, and then another two to sequence the plasma charges before lifting out.

The Rout had been thorough, as ever, enacting a tactical sequence drawn up while in the warp from Galamandro, but even then the losses had been significant. Now the lone hunter-killer was running ahead of them, powering up its macrospeed drives amid a flurry of pursuing las-fire. It was fast, powered by elaborate fusion technology the Mechanicum had yet to fully understand, and would

hit Mandeville range long before the larger VI Legion battleships were able to come about.

Which was why the *Haukr,* one of six sub-warp interceptors, had been placed beyond the perimeter of the bastion's effective fire zone, powered-down, silent.

'Bring us to full speed,' ordered the interceptor's commander, a Legion warrior named Othgar. 'Weapons powered, but keep the shields down – he'll want to–'

Before he had finished speaking, the bridge's teleport station blazed with snarling warp light, and five hulking VI Legion warriors materialised on the dais. Four were slant-helmed in dun-grey Mark II plate, their armour piebald with burn marks and bloodstains. Their leader towered over them, and wrenched his helm off as he strode clear of the frost-crunched teleport locus.

'You can raise them now, commander,' ordered Jorin, called Bloodhowl, mag-locking his helm and shaking clear a long mane of jet-black hair. The jarl of Dekk-Tra had a face seemingly carved from wind-blasted bedrock, long and lean and riven with scars. His skin looked ancient, harrowed over a lifetime of combat in the steel-sharp storm winds. 'Now run it down.'

Othgar shouted fresh orders, vacating the command throne, and void shields shimmered over the forward viewports. The *Haukr* leapt forwards, its plasma drives ramping up to full acceleration.

Jorin joined Othgar on the command platform, his black-rimmed eyes staring out at the void ahead. He did not have the amber irises usual among the Legion, but almost human eyes, barely tinged by the mutating effects of the Canis Helix. Bloodhowl had been old before the Helix had been applied, just as all the commanders of his Great Company had been old. It was said that only a handful had survived the implantation process, being far from the optimal age for such rigours, but they had all dared it anyway, for they had been Russ' own brotherhood, the ones who had guarded him during the

mortal years under Fenris' cruel gaze. To them was given the last of the great companies, the 13th, which was the most honourable and the closest to the primarch.

The hunter-killer was still ahead, racing hard, but its lurid green backwash was already growing larger in the forward viewports. Like all Faash war machines, it was heavy-set and bulky, built to contain the reactor technology that underpinned everything made on Dulan. It was larger than the *Haukr,* armed with the interference guns that caused so much havoc at medium range, and no doubt crawling inside with Scarabine mechanised infantry.

Jorin's mortal eyes narrowed, watching pursuit metrics flicker over the translucent visual feed lenses. His thin lips barely twitched. If he felt anything other than a kind of flint-edged certainty, he did not show it. He never had, not even as a mortal fighting through the bloody snows of Fenris.

'All is ready?' he asked Othgar.

The *Haukr'*s commander nodded. 'For the last six hours.'

Jorin almost smiled. Six hours was a long time to keep forty warriors of the Rout cooped up in cramped crew bays. They would be slavering by now, clawing at the *Haukr'*s airlocks to get at the enemy, which was just as he wanted them to be.

'Prepare the hull-rams,' he ordered, pushing his black hair into a topknot and shackling it. 'I want this done right.'

Then the helm went on again, with a last twist at the gorget-seal. Othgar issued new orders as the company's jarl joined his retinue and made for the bridge's exit doors.

As he came among them, his huscarl, Bulveye, fell in alongside. 'Think they've got the timings sorted?' Bulveye asked.

By then Jorin's expression was hidden behind his wolf's-head death mask, as black as his mane and painted with finger-width streaks of old blood.

'Only one way to find out,' he said, heading towards the

conveyors that took them down into the *Haukr*'s hold.

Bitter experience had taught Imperial commanders the power of Dulanian ship shielding. Their Faash military cadre used technology roughly equivalent to the void generators deployed on Imperial vehicles, or so Mechanicum adepts theorised, but the energy levels needed to penetrate its protective aegis were uncomfortably high, and previously destroyed arrays had an unwelcome habit of reviving after just a few moments of inactivity. Boarding parties had been dispatched to shield-down target ships, only for their incoming torpedoes to be ripped apart by reconstituting energy fields before they could reach the hull-plates. It had become necessary to physically destroy virtually everything the Wolves came across lest it revive, which had a punishing effect on ammunition levels and survival rates, and deprived the strategos of much-needed intelligence.

The Scarabine mechanised troops were almost as bad, being encased in a form of reactor-driven power armour complete with its own personal shielding. Destroying one was a brutal business of relentless, sustained violence, requiring the complete annihilation of spine-implanted generators before a kill could be claimed with certainty. Ranged fire was less effective than the close application of bladed power weapons. After a series of heavy defeats for Imperial Army front-line divisions, it was this factor that had led to the VI Legion being assigned to finish off the Dulan campaign. Only the Legiones Astartes had the firepower, the endurance and – most importantly – the mentality to be truly effective against such enemies. In the early months, even the Wolves of Fenris had struggled to get to grips with the range of archeotech on display, necessitating the rapid adoption of new tactics, some of which took time to perfect.

Jorin didn't reflect on that as he entered the crew bay of the *Haukr,* some hundred metres below the command bridge. It wasn't worth thinking too closely about the margins, not least as most of them were now totally out of his control.

'Hjá, jarl!' his warriors shouted as he joined them, and the barely shackled enthusiasm for slaying was audible in every vox-filtered voice.

Jorin nodded curtly, pushing his way to the front of the assault group and taking up his power axe. The interior of the crew bay was lit only by red strips of combat lumens, and crammed with jostling shells of Legion battleplate. The ceiling was low and buttressed, the walls given an inner brace-lattice of adamantium. That would all be needed.

Bulveye crouched down beside his jarl, one gauntlet pressed against the floor. All across the space, other warriors were doing the same, readying like sprinters before the mark.

'I can feel it,' he growled.

So could Jorin, who remained on his feet, legs braced, axe held one-handed. 'I told him to come in fast.'

A low chuckle echoed from behind Bulveye's faceplate. 'Maybe he *has* got the hang of it.'

Jorin said nothing. The floor began to vibrate – a rhythmic banging that spoke of structural stress. Ahead of them, the far wall, its steep incline broken by the two macro-pistons at either end, began to shake. Warning lights strobed in the gloom, something that made the warriors in front of them laugh.

He crouched at last, feeling his secondary heart kick in. His blood coursed faster, his pupils dilated, his grip tightened.

'Now comes the hour,' he mouthed silently, remembering the old words of combat, the taste of blood and the rush of killing, the purity of murder on the shifting ice. 'Now, my enemy, be the gates of Hel opened.'

Othgar had indeed come in fast. The *Haukr* was a match for the Dulanian ship in speed at least, and thundered on full-burn under the hunter-killer's leeward shadow. The Mandeville point was by then only minutes away, and the pursued was still clearly hoping to make the jump-stage.

Las-fire filled the void space between the two hurtling ships, skittering off void shields and sending spike-radials juddering down hull lines. The Dulanian vessel spun away to port, jetting plasma, but Othgar kept in close, piling on the power to shut down the remaining distance between them.

'All power to the drives,' he commanded as the bridge swayed around him. 'Begin hull-ram sequence, and keep us in tight.'

The *Haukr* did not have the guns to penetrate the Faash ship's shields. Experience had shown that only destroyer-class vessels could reliably disable a Dulanian ship at range, and the Legion's destroyers were a long way from securing a firing solution on such a fast-moving target.

But Dulanian shields were not unbreakable. A sufficiently massive object, moving sufficiently fast and on a perfectly weighted trajectory, had been shown to crack them. In theory.

'Sequence begun,' reported Ingold, master of the watch.

'Trajectory laid in,' called out Arinn, navigation mistress.

Othgar turned from the internal tactical displays to the upper viewports. The hunter-killer hung above and in front of them, peppering the forward shields with dense las-fire, corkscrewing increasingly desperately to evade the *Haukr*'s attentions.

From far below, a thick clunk resounded under the decking as the hull-rams were primed. Othgar had overseen their retrofitting himself – two heavy maul-shaped battering claws twenty metres apart, modified from the boarding clamps of larger vessels.

Between them was the wide, explosive-rigged hull-seal, normally a standard external embarkation hatch, now primed with melta charges along the length of two clam-shell outer doors.

The hunter-killer made a final attempt to evade the ramming manoeuvre, dipping its nose hard and swinging round to starboard.

'We've got it,' said Othgar, with savage satisfaction. 'Bring us in.'

Proximity klaxons blared as the *Haukr* surged up under its prey's shadow, Arinn's expert piloting shadowing every movement made by the enemy. The chronos whirred, counting down the time remaining until a warp jump would be possible. It was tight, and getting tighter.

'Fixing locus,' reported Ingold coolly, locking a beacon onto a point halfway along the hunter-killer's lean underside. 'Brace for impact.'

A violent slam sent the decking slewing madly, and the viewports ahead disappeared in a welter of static. A sound like claws scraping down iron shuddered along the length of the *Haukr,* and the armourglass viewports cobwebbed with spiralling cracks.

For a moment the two ships ran alongside one another, their void shields fizzing and shrieking as the energy fields reacted against one another. The *Haukr* shook ferociously, only kept in position by the immense pressure of its red-lining plasma drives.

'Hold fast!' roared Othgar, bracing himself against the bulk and slide of the deck.

The screaming continued. Explosions sprayed out from high up in the *Haukr*'s vaults, sending debris cascading onto the levels below. The engine's pitch soared higher, hitting a strangled note of frenzy, and a viewport shattered, throwing plasma-laced shards flying across the bridge.

'*Hold fast!*' Othgar repeated, ignoring the howl of decompression and the frantic efforts of the bridge crew to seal the leak.

Then the remaining viewers blazed with neon light, and with a sharp bang the twin interlaced shields both blew out. The *Haukr* surged in close, no longer buffeted by the resistant energy aegis, and slammed full on into the enemy hull. Metal plates squealed and tore up as the outer flanks ground into one another, kindling electric discharge all along the newly joined interface.

For a moment it felt as if the *Haukr* would simply burrow through the hunter-killer's under-hull, propelled by the greater momentum, but then the melta charges on its outer hull blew, and fresh plumes of red-hot flame rippled out across the mangled plating.

The claws had gone in, shunted hard through the prey's outer skin by explosive macro-pistons. Melta flares daisy-chained across the stricken craft's flanks, eating further into its battered carcass.

Othgar turned away from the tactical viewers, back to his local augur station. Across a lone visual feed, he could see a flurry of forty-five close-packed red runes moving, bursting out of confinement. He could almost hear the ring of boots against iron, and the thought of it made him smile.

'They're off,' he reported with satisfaction, turning his attention now to the survival of his ship. 'Ten more seconds, then pull away, and get a lock for the hull guns. We're not out of this yet.'

The melta charges blew in concert and the entire far wall of the crew-bay disappeared behind a curtain of fire. Positioned ten metres back, the Wolves let out a roar of triumph and raced straight into the wall of flame. They were running even as they hit the blast zone, vaulting through the disintegrating mess of hull plating and deck spars, and out into the liquid smear of atoms beyond.

Jorin was at the head of it, accompanied by Bulveye and his retinue, smashing their way through a labyrinth of burning, melting,

sliding detritus. As he charged into the inferno his helm briefly crackled with white noise, the lens filters overwhelmed with the extreme heat and light, but then he was through, crunching aside a collapsing brace-beam and barrelling into the interior of the hunter-killer beyond.

The internal corridors were thick with blown dust and fire-plumes. Alarms were sounding from some way off, though they were half drowned out by the clatter and tear of escaping atmosphere.

The warp engines were ahead, two levels above them. Othgar would have to withdraw the docking claws imminently, dragging half the Dulanian's under-hull with them, so they had to keep moving, push up, carve their way into the interior.

Most of the Wolves were carrying close-combat weapons designed to take apart the Faash mech-troops – chainswords, axes, lightning claws – but six were equipped with heavy lascutters. These took up position where the damage was already most acute and started to work, scything through deck-plates, cutting deep into the ship's hull. Whole sections sheared away as the las-beams blasted through them, exposing the maws of undamaged chambers beyond. The rest of the Wolves surged across heaps of glowing rubble, scrabbling to reach the firm ground from where the assault could begin in earnest.

As Jorin reached the summit and prepared to push on, he heard an ominous groan from behind him. He half turned, just in time to see an entire wall of burning plasteel peel away, ripped clear of its footings by the *Haukr* extracting its ramming claws. Already weakened deck sections dissolved, collapsing into smouldering fragments and tumbling away to where the outer hull was being ripped apart.

'Faster!' he commanded, powering further up into the hunter-killer's intact interior.

The Wolves of Fenris forged ahead through the howl of escaping oxygen, cutting and blasting their way deeper, before finally breaking into a long hallway, ten metres across and twenty high. The walls were decorated with chain-lofted Dulanian battle-flags, rippling crazily in the racing hurricane. The icon of a great crimson and black dragon loomed at the far end.

By then the decking had stabilised, and the Wolves sprinted down the length of the hall, blades held low, hunting. The first Scarabines met them at the far end, twenty of them, emerging from behind bulkheads on either side of the hall. They were as big as the Space Marines, encased in blunter, more cumbersome armour with more deeply rounded pauldrons and a slabbed breastplate design. Each of them shimmered with the gauzy sheen of personal shielding, and they carried projectile weapons encased in their gauntlet housings. They lumbered out in the open, zeroing their twin-barrelled weapon arms on the approaching Wolves and opening fire.

Interference guns snapped out, soundlessly, before hitting the first targets. The air shook, and a rattle of explosions burst along the front rank of Wolves. Ceramite panels were powderised, throwing bursts of blood from the flesh beneath.

They had known the fusillade was coming. The Faash weaponry was hard to evade, rearranging matter at the molecular level, and so they had charged into it, aware of the danger. This tactic was not mindless, but performed in the knowledge that recharge times for the esoteric guns was significant – they would get the first shots away, but after that it was bladework. Ten of Jorin's warriors stumbled, their breastplates and helms carved open and crackling with sparks, but the rest charged onwards, crashing into the Scarabine mech-troops before the guns could repower.

Jorin slammed into the lead enemy, feeling the hot wash of an energy field snarl against his armour. He whipped his axe blade

across, going for the cabling at the Faash warrior's neck, and the disruptor growled with released plasma.

His enemy was slower, hampered by heavy layers of armour, but also hard to wear down. Jorin hacked, two-handed, going for the weapon-arm before it could fire again. The strike was well aimed, hitting at the elbow-joint and grinding deep, but again the shield repelled it. Then the Dulanian punched out with his other gauntlet, catching Jorin on the shoulder and sending him reeling.

All across the hall, legionaries raced into contact, taking on Scarabines in intermingled lines of close-ranged grappling. Bulveye piled in beside his jarl as the grey-armoured fighters engaged, chainsword snarling. He scythed the weapon across the same Faash warrior's armour, grinding through the shield-covering in a shriek of sparks. The aegis held out for a second, blazing with inflamed feeder-energy, before finally exploding and throwing Bulveye bodily away.

By then Jorin was back into contact, hacking furiously with his blade, gouging and tearing. The warrior fought back, punching out with crackling power gauntlets, but the man within was a mortal, with mortal muscles and mortal reactions, and there was only so much a suit of armour could compensate for.

'*Hjá!*' cried Jorin with satisfaction as his axe sliced across the neck-cables at last. A burst of pale green gas exhaled from the suit's innards – chem-stimms, pumped around the armour's breathing apparatus – and the warrior collapsed, gurgling on his own blood.

There was little time to celebrate the kill – the twin lines of Wolves and Scarabines remained tightly locked, caught up in the claustrophobic embrace of strike and counter-strike. Jorin reached for Bulveye, hauling him to his feet, and they were soon fighting hard again, back to back, surrounded by the thrust and block of desperate violence. The Wolves had the greater numbers, and

pressed on through a scream of rushing air, driving their enemy back pace by pace, but taking crushing hits in their turn. Blood flecked into the turbulence, spattering the flapping war-banners.

Jorin blink-summoned a wire-frame schematic of the route ahead, generated by his armour's cogitators in tandem with augur-sweep data. Incoming target runes were still converging – more mech-troops, moving fast to staunch the incursion.

'Sixty seconds,' said Bulveye, dragging his chainsword across the battered faceplate of a Faash mech-trooper and swinging about to face the next.

Jorin nodded. That was the time remaining before the ship reached jump-range. 'Hold them here,' he commanded.

The division had been planned, for the hall was an intersection of many routes. Bulveye pressed back into the fray, roaring out commands to twenty of the Wolves to remain in position, driving the line onwards. They punched and mauled, gouged and ripped, fracturing the oncoming Faash armour plates in savage, overabundant physical brutality.

The rest of the boarding party pulled clear of combat and fell back to join Jorin, who now fought his way towards an open portal in the hall's left wall. Through the portal was a metal frame stairwell, zigzagging up a rectangular shaft to the levels above.

Jorin broke out, one hand clutching his axe, the other his bolter. He and his warriors tore up the stairwell, their heavy treads sending out echoing clangs, their helm-lumens flickering against the lattice of metal spars. Las-fire zinged down from up ahead, grazing across already-damaged ceramite.

Forty seconds.

Jorin was first to reach the vaulted entrance to the warp drive chambers, ignoring the rain of las-beams to spy the first of the emerging enemy – mech-guards, just as the others had been. The air shook, marking the firing of interference guns, and Jorin

swerved to one side. He felt a burst of heat, the power pack on his back shaking and spitting, but the worst of the blast missed him, impacting on the far wall with a crack of detonation. Still moving fast, Jorin charged into the two foremost Faash troopers, knocking them back into the doorway's edge. Their personal shields screamed under the pressure, but held.

Jorin didn't finish them – there was no time – but used his strength to shove the first warrior aside, then the second, then to power on through into the chamber beyond. The Wolves racing hard on his heels did the rest, driving the off-balance Faash to the ground, piling in on them, crushing them, wrenching their armour-cables free and shattering their helm-visors.

Ten seconds.

Jorin kept running. The prize opened up before him – a relay chamber for the hunter-killer's warp train. It was a glowing, energy-filled room lined with plasma shielding and bustling with defenders. The Scarabines emerged through a miasma of dust and debris, firing las-weapons and interference guns, knowing they only had to keep the invaders at bay for a few moments more.

Jorin took hits and ignored them, his brothers already surging past him and forming a cordon.

Five seconds.

Above him, high in the centre of the chamber, was the source of the swirling light – a three-metre-diameter conduit pipe suspended amid a thicket of chain-cabling, pearlescent with the thunderous passage of raw promethium, feeding the growing pitch of the massive warp drives as they accelerated up to full power.

Jorin braced himself and fired, sending bolt-rounds screaming straight into the conduit's protective shell. Every mass-reactive shell hit exactly the same place, shredding the outer protective layers and driving in deeper. The explosions reached critical mass, and the conduit's casing split apart, showering the chamber with

erupting fountains of hot engine fuel. Las-beams from the defenders punched through the cascade, igniting it into a curtain of immolation and dousing the entire chamber with a raging cataract of pure burning promethium.

The Wolves advanced through the inferno, their pelts and totems aflame, firing all the while at the scores of enemies caught up in the shimmering heat-shake. The Faash shields resisted the terrible heat, though they swelled into glittering candles. The lesser Dulanian troops were not so fortunate, burned alive within their carapace suits, shrieking as the liquid fire pulled flesh from bone. The maelstrom of fire – bolter and interference – criss-crossed and overlapped in an orgy of shimmering, fuel-laced destruction.

'Are we in the warp?' demanded Jorin urgently, switching his fire from the tattered conduit and back towards the phalanx of Faash mech-troops ahead.

His banner-bearer, Hjalmar Stormfist, fur-heaped shoulders a riot of flames, laughed harshly. 'You hear warp drives, jarl? I don't.'

Jorin laughed in turn, sweeping his gaze across the burning chamber. Hjalmar was right – the severed conduit had blocked the drives' fuel intake and, amid the rush and boom of the flames, the heavy clank of turbines going offline could be made out. The enemy had been thrown into confusion by the horrific heat, and even the mech-suits were stumbling now, as if their sensors had been sent haywire by the extremes of temperature.

'That is well,' Jorin snarled, hefting his axe and picking his next target. 'Then we have all the time we need.'

Those who remained of the Dulanian guard fought with their customary tenacity, but with their chance of making warp gone, they were now at the mercy of the Rout detachment, and entire worlds had sued for peace in the face of less.

Once Jorin had secured the plasma chamber, the overhead conduits were sealed and the jets of promethium capped. Hails were received from Othgar, still standing station off the hunter-killer's bows, and then from the mass of the main Wolves flotilla as it drew into range. Ignoring Legion requests for status reports, Jorin retraced his steps through the ship to meet up with Bulveye, mop up the residual combatants and take control of the bridge. Throughout it all, the surviving Dulanians just kept on fighting, exacting pain for every conceded metre, knowing that the chance for mercy had passed a long time ago.

In a xenos enemy, Jorin might have respected the continued defiance, for it was natural instinct for any organism to defend its own, but there could be no respect for the Tyrant of Dulan's armies. His soldiers were human, of the ancient seed of Terra in its first scattering across the stars, and could have taken their place amid the burgeoning glory of the Great Crusade if they had chosen. Their technology was advanced, their force-numbers formidable, and so by pledging allegiance to the Allfather's vision they could have augmented the progress of galactic conquest. That they had chosen to reject enlightenment, and moreover boasted of the choice, made them contemptible. The Dulanians had been given a choice and had spurned it, leaving only one, remorseless result: death without honour, erasure from the annals of humanity. The hunter-killer crew's last dregs of resistance was more akin to rats squabbling over corpse-meat than any true sense of heroism.

Jorin kept on moving. Bulveye was not in the hall of banners. The fighting had progressed up towards the bridge level, and so Jorin followed its trail, flanked by Hjalmar and his retainers. They passed over broken armour-shells, sweeping like nameless ghouls, their own battleplate scorched black and the markings stripped from the ceramite. Bloodstains streaked the decking, dripping from the low ceilings and glistening in the flickering lumen-strips.

Everything reeked of oil and burning and torn flesh, as was always the way with boarding actions.

'They've pushed on far,' remarked Hjalmar, observing the growing signs of carnage. A few Wolves lay among the heaps of the slain, but the vast majority of the dead were Dulanian.

Jorin might have celebrated that on another day, but now it made him uneasy. His orders had been for Bulveye to hold the intersection, preventing the enemy from reaching the drive chambers in numbers and giving his own warriors time to halt the race towards the warp. Bulveye was a reliable fighter, not prone to berserker charges when given a direct command.

'Faster,' ordered Jorin, picking up the pace. Soon the hails from other ships would mount up, and there was work to be done first.

They reached the bridge just as the last howls of combat were dying down. Echoes of kill-frenzy still resounded in the high vaults, clinging to the adamantium like lost souls. Jorin loped out into the centre of a wide expanse, kicking aside bodies and making for the central command platform – a circular column rising two metres above concentric levels of crew-stations. A blister-dome of armourglass rose above that, threaded with crimson spokes, giving a view of the void beyond.

Bolter-burst cadavers lay everywhere, slumped over sensor-terminals, sprawled across a deck ankle-deep in blood, jammed down into radial trenches where spilled cables spat and sparked. Three Scarabine mech-suits had been ripped apart and now lay in an intermingled heap close to the command throne, their limbs torn free and hurled far across the bridge's interior.

Bulveye was guarding the throne, bolter drawn, as were most of those Jorin had placed under his command. The Wolves were no longer advancing, but fanning out warily, all their attention focused ahead, to where the sensor-pits gave way to a wide raised area running down to the very end of the observation dome.

‘What happened here?’ Jorin voxed, coming alongside his huscarl.

Bulveye was breathing hard, the sound strained from behind a gore-stained helm-face. ‘Haraal,’ he replied, gesturing with his bolter muzzle.

Jorin looked out, and understood.

Haraal had been a Fenrisian, one of the first inducted into the Legion after the Allfather’s coming to the ice world. He had not been one of Dekk-Tra’s honour guard, the elders who dared the Helix well past the years deemed possible by Imperial sages, but was fresh-taken from the floes, as pure a fighter as ever endured the trials of Asaheim. He had flourished in the Crusade, taking to the rounds of murder with relish and joy. He was popular with his battle-brothers, a candidate for elevation within the Legion, the epitome of a son of Russ.

All that had gone. He stood alone, out ahead of the others, panting in a slurred mess of sputum-flecked bile. His helm had been ripped off, revealing a shaggy mess of hair and extended fang. His right gauntlet was also gone, and in its place was a clawed fist clutching the head of a Dulanian crew member. The rest of his armour was more red than grey, covered now in a thick sheen of glistening viscera. He had fallen into a stoop, one hand pressed against the deck, and his eyes shone with a bestial illumination. His pupils no longer focused on anything in the room, but darted back and forth, as if he were surrounded by a host of unseen enemies.

‘How long?’ asked Jorin grimly.

‘It started in the hall,’ said Bulveye, keeping his bolter trained on Haraal. ‘Another one too – Bjell Hook-knife, though they cut his thread on the way up.’ Bulveye’s voice was dark. Such was not a good death – it was tainted, made possible only by a madness born of the deepest nightmares of a singular world.

‘How many did he take?’

Bulveye snorted a low laugh. ‘Most of them. Those three mech-suits? All of them too, one by one.’

Jorin looked at the creature that had been Haraal. It was twitching now, its eyes moving more violently, scoping out danger. Its face was changed – stretched into the jowly mass of a true-beast’s maw, its nostrils flared and sniffing. Slowly, it began to advance, creeping back towards the line of VI Legion warriors.

‘Haraal!’ Jorin called. ‘Stand fast!’

The creature halted, swinging its head from side to side, snarling and spitting saliva in yellow loops.

‘You defeated this,’ Jorin told it, moving carefully ahead of the line of his battle-brothers. ‘Remember? You passed through the madness. You remained a man.’

The Haraal-creature growled, sinking lower, its armour-clad haunches shivering. Blood dripped from its under-belly, running down the gun-metal outlines of Legiones Astartes iconography. It seemed to recognise Jorin then, focusing blearily on him and baring its fangs, hissing like a feline.

Jorin stopped moving. He did not aim his weapon. It was not the first time he had seen such a transformation, but never before had one gone so far. To witness it made him sick to his soul.

‘It can be overcome,’ he said, hoping fervently that it was true. ‘You can slay it, just as you did before.’

Haraal blinked. For a moment, comprehension flickered and the slavering stopped. The creature seemed to become aware of what was around it – not the dark pines of the Fenrisian wilds, but the site of its own rampant slaughter-orgy. Its wretched breathing became frenzied, and it reared back up onto two legs, a look of horrific agony imprinted on its features, and howled.

Jorin heard the clink of bolter clips loading. ‘No!’ he ordered, remaining isolated, but it was too late.

Haraal charged at the jarl, bounding towards him with claws out,

its face twisted into a deathly mask of flesh-stretched madness.

The bolters opened up, slicing through its outstretched limbs and blasting armour-chunks free. Incredibly, it kept on coming, roaring in pain and confusion, somehow shrugging off the impacts even as its body was shot through again and again.

Jorin never moved. The Haraal-creature collapsed at his feet, destroyed in the hail of bolt-rounds, its body leaking a slick of heart's-blood. Jorin knelt down, stooping to grip the monster's head in his gauntlets. It was barely breathing by then, just a thick wheeze that clotted and bubbled in a burned-out throat.

Jorin looked into its eyes, searching for something, anything, just a remnant. All that reflected back at him was agony – animal agony, bereft of intelligence or self-awareness. Jorin extracted himself, reached for his own bolter, placed the tip of the muzzle against the creature's temple.

'Forgive me,' he breathed, and squeezed the trigger. The round exploded on impact, ending its torment.

As it had been with Bjell, it was a bad way to die. A warrior of the Aett should die as a man, on his feet, fighting against the blood-dark tide. If there had been a way, Jorin would have wished to give him that last grace. The beast's head, now just a mass of gore, slumped wetly to the deck, and the wheezing gurgles ended.

For a long time, no one spoke. The bridge's automated systems droned and cycled, keeping the hunter-killer powering out into the void. Incoming vox-link requests blinked across helm-lenses, swelling red for urgency. Somewhere out in the void, the VI Legion's outriders would be pulling alongside, waiting to hear if the jarl had got what he'd come for.

Eventually, Jorin pulled himself back upright, shaking the gore from his gun's barrel.

'There were no signs?' he asked, turning back to Bulveye.

'Nothing. It came out of nowhere.'

‘There will be picter-logs from the *Haukr*. Perhaps a sign they give off, before combat? Something to watch for.’

Bulveye nodded, uncertain. ‘Perhaps. But what now?’

Jorin looked at the devastation around him. If Haraal had caused most of it, then the curse brought astonishing strength alongside rapid degeneration.

‘Take the body back to the *Haukr*. Hook-knife’s too. Tell no one. They were our packs, our brothers.’

Bulveye nodded again. ‘It will be done.’

As he spoke, more priority hails scrambled down the interior of their helm-displays. Ahead of them, in the void beyond, the sleek grey profile of a VI Legion destroyer slid across the abyss.

‘They’ll want to know if we have it,’ said Bulveye.

The intention had been to leave the ship’s captain and senior crew alive. Dulan’s star empire had been steadily reduced, stripped of its outer defences and was now ripe for invasion, though the coordinates of the home world itself were not yet known.

‘This ship was making for the warp,’ said Jorin, scanning the bridge for undamaged cogitator units. ‘It will have its course stored somewhere. Tear it apart – we do not leave until we have something to take with us.’

Only once the order had been given did Jorin finally allow the vox-link requests to filter through to his helm’s earpiece.

‘Make it good,’ he snarled, linking up with the company flagship, the *Aesrumnír*.

‘*Jarl,*’ came the voice of Arif Redeye, the ship’s master. ‘*Incoming fleet signals, less than one hour out. You should know this now – the Wolf King is with them.*’

Jorin cursed. ‘Already? We were not due to meet until Verillis.’

‘*Then I would say that things have changed.*’

Jorin cut the link again, shaking his head. The day was not going well.

‘Aye,’ Jorin murmured, watching his battle-brothers haul Haraal’s body clear of the wreckage, the armour falling from the flesh like ash from the fire. ‘Things have changed.’

The wreckage of the Dulanian bastion station had begun to fall away, burning up in the planet’s upper atmosphere, when the first ships of the primarch’s flotilla broke into anchor range. First came the escorts, as slender as skinning-knives, twisting away into guard positions to clear the path for the capital ships. Of those, the greatest was the *Nidhoggur,* grinding its way on low thrust to face its counterpart, the *Aesrumnír*. Both were battleships of the line, surpassed only by the massive Legion command ships themselves, the workhorses and principal killers of the mighty armada of humanity.

Other ships joined them – the remainder of Bloodhowl’s battle-group, other warships of Tra – all under the suzerainty of the jarl Ogvai Ogvai Helmschrot. For now, though, he was not the master of his vessel, for his primarch travelled with him, taking control of the joint Great Companies. Such a thing was not uncommon, for the Wolf King went wherever the tides of war took him, making use of any vessel in the Legion’s formidable complement. Only when the need was greatest and the fate of the entire Rout was at stake did he take command of his own dedicated flagship, the dread *Hrafnkel,* one of only twenty such monsters ever created, and by a distance the most powerful ship in the Legion.

Thus it was that Leman Russ, primarch of the Wolves of Fenris, stood in the *Nidhoggur’*s forward observation tower, flanked on his left by his huscarl of the Einherjar Grimnir Blackblood, and on his right by Helmschrot. Together they watched the bastion station tumble slowly into the furnace of re-entry, its flanks scorched and its lights extinguished.

Russ was a huge, thick-set, burly figure, clad in heavy-slabbed runic armour of rain-grey, marked with icons of Fenris in gold and iron. His long blond hair fell about his shoulders, plaited and dreadlocked and hung with totems of a lifetime at war. The exposed skin of his craggy face was ruddy, suffused with a vital energy that seemed to burn out of his every movement. He was a war engine, a juggernaut, a sliver of a sun's heart snatched from the void and locked with the species-form of a human. Amid the galaxy at large, he was feared or scorned, the leader of a Legion of barbarians and vandals, though few would have dared mouth such sentiments to his face. To those who served with him he was revered beyond measure – a warrior king who led his shield-bearers into battle from the very front, who scorned no hardship that they were asked to bear, who had never been bested by a living soul on any field of combat.

Well, there had been *one,* but that could not be part of the reckoning. The Allfather stood outside all categories, all myths, all sagas, and so to his followers Russ remained inviolate, the bringer of winter to the galaxy and the master of its wars.

At that moment, hanging over Ynniu, he observed the product of his Legion's mastery of violence. The bastion station was long dead, but every sight of the enemy offered up a scintilla more knowledge of them. Several such bases had been destroyed, each at significant cost to the Legion, and yet still so very little was known about the technology that drove them. The Faash were fanatical fighters, wont to scuttle their own ships rather than let them fall into enemy hands.

The primarch knew his jarls despised that devotion. He, on the other hand, had a somewhat more nuanced view. The Legion were gene-conditioned to loathe the targets of the Great Crusade – the xenos, the recidivist human cultures – for it was in their blood, as much as their superhuman strength was. That was what made them

such perfect killing tools, and if that limited their imagination somewhat, then that was what the primarch project was for – beings as creative and empathetic as the greatest of mortal humanity, only gifted too with the vat-grown bodies of the best of its warriors.

And so he sympathised with the Dulanian foot soldiers, doomed to die in the service of a tyrant who cared nothing for them. Behind the masks and the armour plates and the ingenious shields that made them a match for even Legiones Astartes infantry, they were mortal, prone to all the prides and fears and vainglory that mortality brought.

Just as he himself, Leman Russ, was mortal, after a fashion. There were no true gods any more, whatever the credulous of the Imperium might wish for; not since that day on Fenris when the sky had opened in a rain of gold, and the ice had melted from the rock, and the true way of things had been made brutally clear.

'Damned strong boxes,' Russ muttered, looking at the outer skin of the station blister. 'They build them well, I'll give them that.'

Helmschrot, arms folded across his chest, looked less convinced. The jarl was leaner than his master, though scarcely less tall. Long black hair ran down from a severe face, pocked with metal studs and lone steel lip-ring.

The Vlka Fenryka were not great builders. Fenris had a habit of tearing down even the strongest structures erected on its changeable crust, and so produced more destroyers than creators. The Fang itself, still incomplete after decades of construction, had been carved out by geo-architects from Terra, and the fleet built by the shipwrights of Mars; the Rout themselves made little more than the weapons they carried and the armour they wore.

'I never met a wall I couldn't tear down,' Helmschrot muttered.

Russ laughed – a deep, surprisingly engaging rumble of humour. 'And yet they keep on building them.'

A chime sounded at the rear of the observation chamber, and two

doors slid open. Russ did not need to turn to recognise Jorin's tread – he had been able to identify it perfectly back in the old wars too, back when they had both worn armour of hardened leather and the Wolf King's honour guard had had the stringy, spare musculature of un-augmented men.

'Jarl,' he acknowledged.

The master of Dekk-Tra bore more resemblance to his fellow jarl than his primarch, though even there differences remained. Ogvai had been taken from the ice as a child, just as the vast majority of the Legion had, Terran or Fenrisian. Jorin bore the marks of his more arduous passage, not just the scars but the fractionally stilted stance, the black-rimmed eyes that seemed more hollow than they should be, the faint pall of darkness that seemed to follow him like the last smoke of a long-extinguished fire. Now, though, those marks were made more severe by the truly horrific state of his armour – charred, scratched, stripped naked of the furs that normally hung across it.

'I had not expected you,' said Jorin, joining them. He greeted both Blackblood and Helmschrot with a sharp nod. 'We were to meet–'

'At Verillis. Yes, I know. But you have been slow, Jorin.'

The jarl's deep-set eyes flashed, briefly, with anger. '*Skítja,*' he cursed, dismissively. 'You've seen them, how they fight.'

Russ spread his hands expansively, holding them up in the old gesture – *no argument, no weapons*. 'Not my words, jarl. There are many eyes on us here, and they want this done faster.'

'Then tell them to come out here,' said Jorin, his voice low. 'I'll show them what it takes to bring down these bastards, and then I'll show them how quickly it takes me to gouge out their eyeballs.'

Blackblood chuckled.

'On another day, I'd let you,' said Russ. 'But not this one. This battle is running out of our hands, and I don't want it to slip further.

Tell me that you have a path to their home world.'

'They are working on it,' muttered Jorin. 'One ship was all we had, running for the void, right at the end. We'll crack its heart open soon, and you'll have the warp-run you're looking for.'

'It'll need to be quick,' warned Russ, walking out along the curving edge of the observation chamber's outer limit. He gestured for Jorin to follow him, and for the other two to remain where they were, all in a flicker of battle-language, mere darting movements of three fingers. 'So, tell me truly, how has it been here?' he asked, moving under the armourglass perimeter.

'Hard,' admitted Jorin, falling in beside his primarch. 'They don't give up. They know they've nowhere else to go.'

Russ nodded. 'I believe it. I believe *you*. But, jarl, this is the thing. There are those on Terra who don't see things our way. A month's delay, a week's delay, and they're calling us unreliable, too carried away with slaughtering to marshal a proper campaign.' There was no fury in the primarch's voice, just weariness with it all. 'They wanted us taken off this. I heard the whispers too late and had to petition the Sigillite directly.'

Jorin snorted. 'I bet he enjoyed that.'

'He was left in no doubt what I thought, but we don't have many friends on Terra, and other Legions do, and so we find ourselves fighting battles in order to fight battles.' The primarch shook his head in wondering contempt. 'I have no patience for it, but I will not be cast aside like some ailing seneschal. Only in deeds will we find our rightful place. I told Malcador we would be cutting the Tyrant's throat. We were given the order, we will carry it out.'

'What did he say?'

'That it was out of his hands. The astropathic choirs had been mobilised, the fleets were moving. He said he regretted it. I could have ripped his withered lungs out, there and then, but then that would only have contributed to the greater problem. They really

don't like us.'

Jorin stopped walking. Ahead of them, Ynniu's dark-red bulk swelled across the vista beyond the glass, marred only by the burning wreckage of the bastion.

'Then what is this?' he asked. 'We're going to roll over?'

'*Fekke,* no,' said Russ. 'We're going to burn that bastard's world around him while his guts spill through his fingers, but we need to be *faster,* because we now have competition. They've sent in the First Legion, and for two months my younger brother has been sniffing on the same trail as we have. He makes no contact with me – which does not come as much of a surprise, since he thinks of none of us as his equal, and barely considers me part of the same species – and charges through the void to claim the glory of ending the Tyrant's rule for us, something he now sees as his sacred duty.' Russ smiled then – a fang-filled grin of proper amusement. 'So I brought Ogvai along, to give us a few more blades, and plan to get there first. But we need the coordinates, my jarl, or this hunt will grind on for another month and we will miss all the fun.'

'The Lion,' said Jorin, musingly. 'You've fought with him before?'

'I've barely swapped two words with him, and they were enough.'

'They say he will have more worlds under his heel than any other, one day.'

'Probably, him or Guilliman. He's a good tactician. Cold-blooded, stiff-necked, arrogant. It's why he does so well on Terra. Blood of the gods, Jorin, I will *not* be beaten by him.'

Jorin paused and looked at his primarch uneasily. 'Has it come to this – racing across the sea of stars for prizes?'

'Not prizes,' said Russ, fervently. 'Survival. They're building empires, you know that? All of them, my beloved brothers, carving out realms of their own. On Terra, they list them on rolls of gold in

the Preceptory. Not us. All we have is destruction. Take that away, and what's left?' The Wolf King's face, ever quick to mirth, clouded over. 'I swore it, Jorin. I swore I'd slay the master of Dulan, and if I fail in it the voices will stop whispering and start talking, and there are too many of those even for you to silence.'

Jorin shrugged. 'I care not what they say in the Palace.'

'You should. We all should. That's our problem – we don't give a damn.'

'We do, just not about the same things.'

Russ chuckled and slapped his gauntlet against Jorin's pauldron. 'We're going after him. I want to have Dulan found, blasted and burning before the Lion gets within a warp-stage. You can do this for me?'

Jorin looked back at him levelly, as if pondering it, then gave him a wide grin.

'I'll get you there,' he said. 'And when I do, they'll talk of the fight for a thousand years.'

The inner sanctum aboard the *Aesrumnír* was thick with darkness, laced through with the after-stench of burning. Stone altars stood amid the gloom, each one carrying a single weapon – axe, sword, spear – hung above the pitted surface by softly glittering suspensor fields.

At the centre, where the greatest altar lay amid a stone patterning of black-on-grey, three figures stood. The first was Bulveye, his helm removed to reveal a bearded, grizzled face and long, plaited russet hair. The second, Wolf Priest Ulbrandr, called Crowhame, wore obsidian-black plate, adorned with the bleached white of animal skulls. At his belt hung the crozius arcanum, mark of his ancient office, as well as the Fang of Morkai reductor. His mane was pearl-grey, streaked with black and stiff with the rime of age.

‘I see nothing,’ he said.

The third of the group, Rune Priest Leif Hemligjaga, nodded slowly. ‘Nor I.’ He was the tallest of them all, clad in totem-encrusted plate. A long, forked beard spilled across his breastplate, near-white, studded with loops of twisted leather and metal, and his armour was engraved with the deep channels of runic warding.

Before them, suspended in the darkness, spun a hololith rendering of cells in some kind of plasma, swelling, merging, swimming. Runes blinked in and out of existence, picking out salient features, recording anomalies, totalling haemoglobin counts and hormone levels.

Bulveye hesitated before speaking. This was not his domain. ‘There must be some defect,’ he ventured at last.

Ulbrandr, the master of this business, used a brass dial on the altar’s top to expand and zoom in on the blood-cast. The lurid hololith scrolled in deeper, flashing up markers over points of interest. The Wolf Priest’s eyes narrowed, as he drank in the tomes of data contained in every snapshot.

Eventually, he closed the feed and the ghostly image snapped out.

‘I have taken the body apart,’ Ulbrandr said, sourly. ‘Drained every drop of blood from it, carved the muscles from the bone. I looked into its dead eyes.’ He drew in a long, bitter breath through his nostrils. ‘And I have nothing to give you.’

Hemligjaga shifted towards the altar’s far end and took up some artefacts retrieved from Haraal’s corpse – a curved dagger, a skull-amulet, a torc of linked blackmane fangs. One by one, he turned them in his fingers. ‘If it were *maleficarum*, I would smell it,’ he said, softly. ‘All I smell is… the warrior.’

Bulveye wearily ran a hand through his beard, then rubbed his eyes. The many days of combat had taken their toll, and there would be no true rest for some time yet. Jorin had already voxed

the orders from Russ for immediate war-muster, and that meant getting the battered fleet into some kind of readiness.

'We looked at the pict-records,' Bulveye said, racking his mind for something – anything. 'They behave just as the others do. They fight just as the others do, until the moment.'

Ulbrandr fixed his amber eyes on Bulveye. 'And that moment – what does it bring?'

Bulveye shrugged. 'I did not see it until it was too late. Hook-knife was first – screaming out, more than battle cries. Then Haraal. They ran ahead of the others. We were already running, and swiftly, but they were like devils. Their movements sped up. I could not even *see* them.' He remembered the sight, and how it had chilled him. 'They fight like *baresarks*, only ten times as hot, and it destroys them. They tear their armour free, and then we see the worst of it – the wolf, in their eyes, in their jaws, everywhere.'

'That is why they take the test of the Helix,' said Ulbrandr, sceptical. 'They pass it. They overcome it.'

'Not all, clearly,' said Hemligjaga, still studying the items in his palm.

'Combat provokes it,' said Bulveye. 'Every time. They do not change when at rest, only when the lust of war is on them.'

'And when the change comes,' said Hemligjaga, 'it makes them stronger.'

Ulbrandr spat onto the floor. 'Not stronger. Wilder. They cannot control it, and that is no use to anyone.'

'They heed no orders,' agreed Bulveye, uneasily. 'If we were fighting with others, this would fulfil every fear they have of us. If it got out–'

'Who knows?' asked Hemligjaga.

'Bloodhowl,' said Bulveye. 'Those of my company, much of the rest who serve under the jarl. This was not the first time.'

'Outside the Great Company?'

‘None. Not the Wolf King, not the Einherjar.’

‘As far as you know,’ said Hemligjaga, wryly. ‘He’s no fool, nor are his servants.’

‘And nor is the Allfather, and nor are *His* servants.’ Bulveye curled his fist, then punched it against the altar’s edge in frustration. ‘Enough. Bloodhowl has made his ruling. We cure it, or we keep it hidden.’

Hemligjaga laughed. ‘We cure it. No great task, then.’

‘If indeed it is sickness,’ said Ulbrandr. ‘There is so much we do not know about what was brought to Fenris with the Allfather. There is so much we do not know about ourselves. We cannot tear our own fangs out, and yet remain of the Rout. Perhaps this is the same.’

Bulveye hesitated before replying. ‘It was never intended, this sickness. Are we, Dekk-Tra, the only ones who suffer?’

Neither priest could give an answer. At length, Ulbrandr spoke. ‘If others in the Legion were afflicted, would we know? All we have are our own eyes, our own ears. And this is not the first time.’

Hemligjaga let the totems – the last of Haraal’s warrior trinkets – fall to the stone. ‘It will come out. Sooner or later, you know it will.’

Bulveye looked at each of them in turn. ‘Then we wait. We work. If others have the sickness, we will have lore to give them. If they do not, we have not damned ourselves early.’

‘And this is Bloodhowl’s counsel?’ asked Ulbrandr.

Bulveye nodded. ‘It is.’

‘So where is he?’ the Wolf Priest asked.

‘With the Iron Priest,’ said Bulveye, turning away from the altar and starting to walk away. ‘Ripping apart datacores. I think he’s in a hurry to get back in the warp.’

On the high-orbit *Nidhoggur,* buried deep in the interior of the warship, Jarl Helmschrot gave honour to his primarch. The greatest of the many feast-chambers had been decked in the war-banners of the Legion, each one reverently kept after the battles they commemorated. The standards, some little more than burned scraps lashed to iron spear shafts, others intact and elaborately made, hung in the alcoves of long, stone galleries, facing inwards at the mighty firepit cut from the flags below. The coals shimmered with heat-haze, seeming to float over soft beds of angry crimson.

Wooden benches, each one hewn from a single trunk of Fenrisian ironpine, ringed the pit, all crammed with the warriors of Tra. Just as in the halls of the Fang, they were served meat on boards, glistening with fats and running with barely cooked juices. The Rout liked their sustenance close to raw, the better to savour the textures of the kill.

The jarl sat at the high table, flanked by his own guard – a Rune Priest named Heoroth and a warrior named Aeska Brokenlip, among others. Russ had taken the place of honour in the centre. On his left was Blackblood, and at his feet were the hulking outlines of Freki and Geri, both tearing at bones the length of a man's entire leg, their muzzles stained glossy red.

'So what did you make of him?' asked Ogvai, attacking a long strand of gristle.

Russ leaned forwards on the table and took a long swig from an iron bowl. 'Just as ever. You?'

'He'd been set on fire. That might have changed his mood.'

Russ barked a laugh and reached for another hunk of pale pink meat. 'I didn't see it, Ogvai.'

The jarl of Tra was a pure-bred Fenrisian, with the distended jawline, the thick hair, the amber eyes to act as his markers. He had been among the first of the youths to take the terrible draught out in the wilds of Asaheim, but not the first of the Legion. Terrans had

been in the ranks for decades, and after that had come the primarch's own followers, the retainers of the Hall of King Leman Russ. Now those last were the greybeards, called the 'Wolf Brothers', all members of the Thirteenth Great Company, dwindling in number with every year as the rigours of endless war took their toll.

There were those of the Mechanicum and of the Administratum who said that it should never have been done, that only a child could survive the implantation of the organs, and that fate would be cruel to those who tampered with the Allfather's sanctioned template. But none of them could countermand a primarch in his realm, and would never have dared it openly, for the wolf brothers were his retainers, his shield-brothers, his war-kin.

'You two were always too close,' said Ogvai.

Russ looked amused, though there was an edge of danger to it. 'Tell me, then. What am I missing?'

Ogvai reached for more meat, ripping the flesh from a wobble of fats. He gnawed on it thoughtfully.

'They have always gone their own way,' he said at last. 'We only knew you as the Wolf King, son of the Allfather. They knew you as Thengir's vassal. That changes things.'

'You're telling me they don't respect me?'

'All respect you. But Jorin believed you mortal, once. He cannot forget it.'

Russ thought on that. Unlike some of his brothers, he had always suffered his jarls to speak openly with him. Some had ended up with broken jaws for their trouble, though the wounds healed as quickly as the bad blood drained.

'We fought alongside one another for years,' he said. 'He grew older, I did not. What did he make of that? I don't know. He'd seen old Thengir die. He knew how I'd been found – lost among wolves, heralded by every bloody portent known to the rune-rattlers.

Perhaps I should have asked him. Too busy, though – too busy killing to stay alive.'

Ogvai wiped his chin. 'I don't doubt his bravery.'

'No, you're not a fool.'

'I don't even doubt his loyalty. It's just…'

The words trailed off. Russ waited.

'We are one,' said Ogvai at last. 'Terran, Fenrisian, we are all the same, made by the Helix. We passed through the fire as infants and became warriors under the Fang's shadow.' He reached for his own bowl, brim-full with steaming liquid. 'But them. They've known another world. They were men before they were legionaries.'

Ogvai drunk deep, his piece said. Russ toyed with strands of bloody sinew, pulling at them with greasy fingers. Out across the chamber, the warriors ate and drank, laughing, taunting, remembering.

'Everything you say is true of me too,' the primarch said. He pushed his board aside. 'I knew the danger, but denying them the chalice would have been cruelty. I watched those that died, all of them, and in their agony they thanked me. They knew what they wanted, and I could not deny it to them, for I was their jarl, their hearth-master and their war-leader.'

Ogvai listened carefully. At his side, Aeska pretended to eat, though the words reached him too.

'Before you were born, Ogvai, out on some stinking sea-ship or in some filthy cave, I was marching with my first Einherjar. None of them could match me, not after Thengir died and I became full-grown, and yet they did not serve out of fear, but because we were brothers. If that makes you envious, then I cannot care. I cannot change it. I did not ask for this, and nor do I regret that it happened, but I will not lose the last links to that age.'

'You will, someday,' said Ogvai.

'Then not yet.' Russ scowled. 'Hel, you are goading me this

night. What is in your meat?'

Ogvai laughed, took his bowl and drained the contents, then called for more. 'I only tell you what you already know. You did not bring me with you because you need more blades – Bloodhowl has enough already. You sense some fault in them, don't you?'

Russ did not reply at once. He ripped another slab and tore at it with his fangs. Bloody juices ran down his chin, dripping onto the golden rim of his gorget.

'There's fault in all of us,' he said, chewing.

Sensor-servitors had been shackled together down in the *Aesrumnír*'s forge-levels, chained to analytical engines and employed to brute-force interpret the Faash military ciphers. Astropaths, strategos and Mechanicum loremasters were drafted in to assist, together with their data-tearing algorithms and look-up tables. A hundred scribes, all of them Terrans taken from the fleet's expeditionary liaison crews, pored over lists of possible hits, slowly eliminating them, then erasing the scrolls and the data-slate terminals.

Beyond them, the Iron Priest's army of thralls had been pulled from the anvils and the machine shops, freed for the moment from their grinding existence of smelting, refining and hammering. They hauled fresh data-units, many greater in size than a troop transport, up on chain-lifters, then took them apart, opening them up with turbodrills and arc welders. The atmosphere, always humid and painfully hot, ramped up to punishing levels.

Jorin stood above it all, watching from a high walkway as the horde of data-miners hacked into the deeper levels of the captured cores. With him stood Iron Priest Kloja, master of the company's engines of war. The echoing boom and clang of industrial processes made the gantry beneath them rock.

‘There cannot be much more of it,’ said Jorin, working to keep the impatience from his voice.

Kloja shrugged. ‘Maybe. Maybe not. They keep their secrets tight.’

‘But you can break them, yes?’

‘I said maybe. I said maybe not.’

Jorin turned away, exasperated. The whole reason they had laid the ambush was to capture the hunter-killer, to interrogate the crew, to get some hard and certain knowledge of their destination. Haraal had destroyed that by slaughtering them all.

‘And the fleet?’ he asked. ‘Ready to fight again?’

‘Aye, jarl. Fighting’s no problem.’

No, that was right. That was what they had been made for.

‘So tell me,’ said Jorin, ‘ever fought beside the First Legion?’

‘No. Not the Dark Angels. I’d like to. Good colours.’

Jorin turned to him. ‘Seriously?’

‘Black plate. Very nice. They look like killers.’

Jorin didn’t say anything for a while, then turned away. ‘You are strange, priest.’ Below them both, the machines churned and whirred, cycling thousands of combinations every second. ‘They learn their craft by killing beasts, I was told.’

‘So do we. You have a problem with that?’

‘We may find out.’

Just then, from down on the forge-level floor, a cry came from one of the thralls. Others hastened over to where he stood, manning a brass-grilled cogitator unit. Results began to avalanche down the screens.

‘So there it goes,’ said Kloja dryly. ‘The cipher’s broken.’

Jorin seized the gantry rail, leaning far over the edge.

‘A path!’ he roared, addressing the dozens of Mechanicum adepts that now swarmed around the cogitator unit, their robes rustling. ‘Get me a path!’

One of the tech-priests, a cowled magister with a long segmented proboscis, looked back up at him and nodded.

Jorin felt a fierce surge of anticipation. Already he could see the warp-stage numbers filter through to his helm-display, one after the other. The hunter-killer had been making for the home world, its engines already keyed.

'Open a channel to the *Nidhoggur,*' Jorin commanded, pushing his way past Kloja and striding along the gantry towards the exit. 'Tell them we have the route to Dulan, and tell them the fleet is ready on his command.'

Kloja watched him go, his expression impossible to read behind the thick sloping vox-grille of his helm.

'It may be nothing,' he called out.

'It is everything, priest,' Jorin replied, never stopping. 'We are hunting again.'

III

The coordinates of the home world were only the beginning. The galaxy was not like the terrain of a single planet, which might be mapped and surveyed, and thereafter traversed with confidence. The vast distances between stars could only be conquered by braving the warp – an ocean of swells and counter-currents, each one capable of dashing whole fleets into oblivion, or hurling them far out of their course and into uncharted regions.

The known void was but a minuscule fraction of all space, its charted worlds infinitesimal specks on a well of infinite depth. Once, humanity had known more of the many routes through the empyrean, mapping them as their great arks crawled through the galaxy in the earliest days of interstellar exploration. But even now, with the Great Crusade having uncovered so much of that ancient knowledge, ignorance of the galaxy's far expanses was near complete, with only rare oases of light, such as Ultramar or Terra, to break the remorseless dark.

And so it took two more weeks for the Wolves to plot their way to their destination, taking account of the dreams of their Navigators and the gibbering nightmares of their astropathic choirs. Translating the hard scientific business of stellar cartography into the imperfect art of warp passage was not easy, and could not be rushed even by a Legion that was ever impatient to get to the kill. Slowly, though, the route was made clearer, and the flotilla burned a path through the reality-bending vaults of the underverse, the hulls of its ships flexing and creaking as if caught in a winter storm at sea.

Throughout that time, the warriors trained. They scoured down

their armour, ridding it of the filth of combat and re-daubing runes where the old patterns had been destroyed. Under the watchful eye of the priests, the hunters spent long hours in the practice cages, smashing one another into bloody lumps, but getting faster with every sparring match, their senses honed again to combat-readiness. When not in battle-rituals, they refuelled, taking on vast quantities of calories and repairing wounds suffered in earlier fighting. Two weeks was long enough for all but the severest of injuries to heal again, a testament to their bioengineered physique and conditioning. Every ship, from the mightiest battleship to the slenderest escort vessel, echoed to the howl and roar of crescendoing battle-rage, as the Wolves brought themselves back to the highest pitch of exactitude.

All of them knew what lay ahead. The Tyrant of Dulan's empire had been wide-flung, a whole swath of worlds carved out of the ruination of humanity's Old Night of superstition. All of them had been heavily defended and had only fallen after heavy and sustained bombardment, so the centre of the labyrinth could only be more heavily fortified still. The full campaign had lasted for months, giving the enemy time to dig in and prepare.

For most of that period, taunts had been relayed, translated into standard Gothic and piped to every Imperial unit within range. From these, Imperial commanders were quite clear that the Tyrant was not in the slightest part intimidated by them, and nor did he have any intention of running.

He wanted them to come. And he wanted them to fight.

Russ had never listened to any of the taunts. Many enemies, be they xenos or human, had thought to goad him, perhaps calculating that enraging the butcher of Fenris would somehow lead to some kind of tactical unbalancing.

'The problem with that,' as Russ had once explained to his brother Vulkan, 'is that we *like* being angry. So it doesn't do very

much good.'

The Tyrant had, nonetheless, tried his best. Captured mortal troops had been tortured over pict-feeds, sometimes in hours-long sessions, enraging Imperial Army generals and provoking massive retaliatory expeditions. Those had all failed, leading to the Wolves being employed to finish the job, and even then the provocations kept on coming.

Now, though, the window for preliminaries had closed. The VI Legion fleet tore through the warp, driving every vessel's enginarium well past Mars-sanctioned limits to ensure their arrival in the shortest possible time. Axe blades were sharpened, swords were honed, bolters were loaded with priest-hexed ammunition and armour-seals were closed.

The primarch himself commanded of the *Nidhoggur,* while Helmschrot took the battle cruiser *Valkarn*. Bloodhowl remained in command of the *Aesrumnír,* and the remainder of the fleet was deployed to exit the warp in a battle-ready crescent formation. All knew that the planetary defence grid would be up to greet them on arrival, so the real-void run in from the Mandeville points had to be fast and coordinated, hitting the world's orbital zone in an overwhelming tide.

Russ took his place on the *Nidhoggur'*s command throne just as the flagship entered its pre-translation sequence.

'Status,' he said.

Freki and Geri prowled into stations on either side of the throne, their hackles raised and their fangs exposed. Blackblood stood on the dais beside them, together with others of the primarch's own Einherjar retinue, all helmed and battle-girt.

'Entering translation now, lord,' came the report from Haelgrim, the ship's navigation master, stationed with the mortals below the lip of the throne platform. 'Plasma drives engaging, Geller power-down commencing.'

Russ sat back as the deck shook violently, making the warp shutters across the forward viewports rattle in their brackets. The low thunder of the aether drives was joined by the more urgent growl of the real space thrusters powering up. Warning runes sparked into life across every exposed viewscreen, detailing the thousand systems gearing up to manage the shift between realities.

Freki snickered and took a half-pace forwards, slavering. Russ reached down and grabbed the wolf's nape, rummaging the fur.

'Almost there,' he murmured. This pre-battle ritual had been thus for as long as he could remember. His two wolves had been at his side from infancy, growing as he did, maturing into the hulking beasts that now accompanied his every march to war. They had endured far beyond the standard lifespan of their kind, and neither showed any sign of a lessening of vigour.

A sharp bang resounded across the bridge, and the deck reeled as if struck. As one, a hundred warp shutters slammed back into their housings, exposing once more the glitter-spread of the starry void. The receding booms of winding-down warp drives were drowned by the thunder of plasma-trains reaching full tilt. The *Nidhoggur* surged forwards, surrounded by dazzling flashes as the other ships in the fleet crashed through the barrier between empyrean and real space, and joined the hunt.

For a moment, it seemed like there was nothing but empty space around them, as if they had emerged into the trackless lacuna between the stars and were light years from anywhere. The bridge remained in a ferment, though, with officers shouting orders and thralls racing to follow them. The great weapon systems of the battleships were run out – colossal macrocannons and lances, surging into life as their energy coils and power reservoirs were kindled, stoked and set roaring.

'Signals incoming!' cried the master of the watch, and immediately every sensorium servitor in the fleet started processing

the hundreds of ship-marks swimming across the extremis-range augurs.

Now Geri rose up too, back arched, legs trembling with eagerness.

'Speak to me,' said Russ, idly.

The master started to reel off the figures, the vectors, the volumes, but Russ had only asked him to speak so that others would hear – he was capable of processing the information from the screens far faster than anyone else. Already he was visualising the coming battle, seeing the paths it could take, planning how to bring it to the only conclusion that mattered to him – the kill, fast and without hope of recovery.

Other voices were rising now – the gunnery chief, the pilots, the garrison commanders. Russ stood above it, silent still, a lone point of stability as the reports and counter-reports flooded in. Ships were moving, shifting into standard offensive deployments. Fire-lanes covered fire-lanes, thrust-vectors were laid in on top of thrust-vectors.

Dulan appeared on the scopes – as red as Ynniu had been, though smaller, a world of rock and iron and steel, hyper-industrial, ringed with a huge defence halo and other orbital stations. Soon the world would be in full visual range – they were hurtling, screaming through space, full momentum achieved.

'*Destroyer* Frey-Slavor, *come about, cover flanks of gunship wing five. Good. Maintain speed and–*'

'*Not getting enough power on that lance. Fekke, pull it from somewhere or I'll rip your–*'

'*Affirmative, we're seeing that. No, not at that speed. Divert down to four-five-thirty-four and–*'

The voices were like an ocean, seething and bubbling, jetting down every vox-conduit in the fleet and sending the gigantic war vessels along their precisely plotted trajectories.

Dulan appeared on the first real-viewer, tiny in the beginning, just a brighter star, then getting bigger with speed. The curve of its atmosphere – seventy-four per cent nitrogen, twenty-four per cent oxygen, the rest traces, very similar to Fenris – appeared in the auspex feeds.

Russ stood up. As he moved, his wolves padded to his side, pawing the ground, eyes fixed ahead with the rigid, unbending gaze that only a beast of Fenris could truly perfect.

'Why do they not come to meet us?' the primarch asked, softly.

Most of the crew, frantically busy with the million tasks of bringing a battlefleet into range, did not hear. Only Blackblood, the closest, responded.

'We are still a long way out, lord,' he said.

Russ shook his head. 'I see the augur-marks. There are a hundred ships on that world. More than enough. They do not engage. Why?'

Even as he spoke, the screens became crammed with fresh information. Dulan was now a fist-sized orb on the principal viewportal, swelling like a tumour, pocked with fast-moving points of darkness. The first pinpricks of explosions – tiny needles of neon-white – danced over the tactical vista.

A comm-signal rune from the *Aesrumnír* glowed into life on Russ' helm-display, and he was answering almost before the lumens had reached full intensity.

'I see it, jarl,' he said to Jorin. 'So, then – you were not quick enough.'

Russ cut the link, not wanting to hear the reply and already feeling the dull weight of failure. His two wolves whined, immediately picking up the change of mood.

Blackblood was still looking at him. 'What is it?'

Russ laughed – a dry, humourless bark. 'Look at the scopes. They do not attack us because they are already being attacked. My brother is ahead of us – half those ships you see are his.'

Seconds later, ship-idents started to feed into the augur-banks, cross-referenced with Legion records and flashing up names, one by one.

The *Redemptive Fire*.

The *Blade of Numarc*.

The *Austere Purification*.

And the one name known to all who had any dealings, no matter how scant, with the recent history of the Great Crusade.

The *Invincible Reason*.

Russ gripped the hilt of his great chainsword, *Krakenmaw*, as if he would draw the blade then and there. The tumult on the bridge grew as the situation became clear – a huge void battle was already in progress over Dulan's orbital zone, and they were late for it.

'What are your orders?' Blackblood asked.

Helmschrot was hailing him, as were Jorin and all the other commanders, needing his word before they would act. The fleet maintained its full speed, barrelling ever closer. Their incoming trajectory must have been picked up by the enemy's scanners, just as it must have been by the First Legion's. Only moments remained before the Wolves entered lance-range.

Russ exhaled in frustration, and his hand slipped from *Krakenmaw*'s grip.

'Maintain course and speed,' he ordered, opening the vox to address the fleet ship-commanders as well as the *Nidhoggur*'s bridge crew. 'Relieve and support any First Legion ship encountered, but otherwise keep to tactical shape. No quarter, no respite. Allfather willing, we have them now.'

He took a deep breath. From here on in, he would not be fighting alone, and the knowledge of that was like a knife to his heart.

'So slay them,' he said bitterly. 'Slay them all.'

In later centuries, the void battle over Dulan would only be recorded in terse entries, lost amid the volumes and volumes of historical tomes that charted the Great Crusade, most consigned to dusty archives and buried under the weight of similar military records. The *Annales de Legiones Astarte de Gehennae Proxima,* one of the more complete records to survive into the Imperial Age, merely noted that nine ships of the line were lost, along with two thousand Legion warriors and twenty thousand mortal auxiliary fighters. Placed against the countless engagements of the age, that was not especially remarkable.

Such scholarly reserve did not, however, hope to convey the desperate savagery of a planetary action involving the last stand of an empire. To its inhabitants, Dulan was every bit the equivalent of Terra, if not in size and grandeur, then certainly in importance. It had endured during the centuries of strife following the first scattering of humanity into the stars. None who dwelt there had ever known another home world. In the vernacular, 'Dulan' merely meant 'Earth', and there were no other planets for them to fall back to, no places worth seeking out as refuges. So they would dig deep there, even knowing that death was surely inevitable, sooner or later, and fight for every last scrap of its sacred territory.

Their ships, red-prowed and swollen with reactor casements, burned out of the orbital quadrants, their interference guns already firing. The great iron defence halo, as ancient and vast as the famed circlet encircling Medusa, let loose from fixed gunnery points, lighting up in a spectacular strobe-pattern of detonations. Faash fighter wings swooped and thrust through larger formations, choreographed like dancers, spitting fire from their underslung main barrels. Every cubic kilometre of space seemed full, crammed with the zing and spit of las-fire, the rolling blooms of void explosions, the tilt and tumble of burning metal.

The Lion had engaged at arm's length, keeping his major

warships out of the most concentrated areas of combat and firing from a distance. His lance-strikes were almost obscenely powerful, vomited in concert from the dark hook-prows of his aquiline battleships. Even Faash shielding could do little against that raw power, and local space was already littered with tidal swells of wreckage.

To prevent the enemy coming among the battleships and engaging them at close quarters, the Lion had sent his escort-class forces directly into the heart of the Faash formations. They were suffering badly there, outgunned and outnumbered, but their sacrifice kept the stage clear for the repeated, hammering onslaught from their larger counterparts at higher anchor. The Dulanian forces kept on coming, furiously trying to break through the Dark Angels vanguard to get to the inviolate battleships, while the First Legion outriders fought just as fiercely to keep them hemmed in.

In the last few seconds before the *Aesrumnír* hit weapons-range, Jorin took it all in.

'They're sacrificing their own,' he said, grimly. 'Those are Legion assets they're throwing away.'

Bulveye, standing at his side, shook his head. 'Cold,' he said.

'It may be their way of war,' said Jorin, calling up attack vectors from the master of the watch. 'It's not mine.' He scanned across the incoming idents, and selected one of the largest Dulanian battleships – a huge, blood-red monster with a hunched spine and smog-trailing thrusters. 'That one's barely touched. We'll take it.'

The *Aesrumnír* swaggered into the heart of the conflagration, its main drives powering it round in a wide arc. No gunship wings had been released, for they knew the Faash ships were superior at close range, and so the Wolves warships looked to their own defence. Broadsides opened up in rippling waves, hurling clouds of armour-ripping shells out into the vacuum.

By then the *Nidhoggur* and *Valkarn* were adopting similar tactics, cloaking themselves in a protective haze of concentrated

power, picking a target and burning straight towards it. Where the First Legion capital ships remained aloof, the VI Legion's tore straight into the heart of the inferno, slugging their way clear towards the epicentre of destruction.

'Jarl, we are being hailed,' came the report from *Aesrumnír*'s sensorium pits. The master of star-speakers, a mortal named Beren Jarekborn, swung around in his throne. 'It's the First Legion vessel *Blade of Numarc*.'

'Never heard of it,' said Jorin, focused on the prey-ship ahead. 'Respond when we're clear of this one. I want my blade blooded first.'

The Dulanian battleship had not sat idly, waiting to be attacked, but had already come about, lifting its heavy prow and exposing a brace of interference barrels. It looked to have taken some superficial damage along its dorsal flank, but nothing big enough to threaten it. The telltale signs of interference build-up crackled swiftly across its onrushing maw.

'That's close enough,' said Jorin, coldly. 'Fire main lance.'

The *Aesrumnír*'s gunners had been waiting for the order. The energy-loops were already snarling, the promethium igniters were tight with racing fuel, and the electro-plasma shunts were humming with pent-up momentum. As soon as the jarl's words left the comm, the main lance spat its immense payload of scouring energy across the intervening abyss.

The impact smacked into the Dulanian battleship just under the bows, exploding across the gathering interference shock wave and redounding into a merged cataclysm of released energy. The Faash ship titled over its axis, its engines running wildly as its internal momentum was up-ended.

'Again,' ordered Jorin.

The *Aesrumnír* was still thundering, its broadside batteries blazing at the shoals of lesser craft trying to drill a hole through its

shields. As the distance between them narrowed to less than a hundred kilometres, the lance erupted a second time, scoring another direct hit on the reeling enemy.

'Lord, we have urgent comms from the First Legion,' ventured Jarekborn, but the blood of the commander was up and it was barely heard.

'Finish this,' snarled Jorin, clenching his fist.

The Dulanian had fired back by then, a rolling wave of interference that snagged across the *Aesrumnír*'s forward void shields and pushed them hard against the underlying hull-plates. The real-viewers dissolved into a hail of static, and the bridge bucked, but the storm was weathered. Further hits from the smaller hunt-packs on either flank did little to halt the onward charge. Jorin drove his ship hard and straight, shrugging off the incoming strafes, clearing space ahead for the final lance-strike. The *Aesrumnír* pulled wide, tilted on its central axis, emptied its powercells, then fired for a third time.

This time the distance was so slight that any shot would have hit square, and the lance-beam scythed straight through the Dulanian ship's forward fusion shields, scattering them into a supernova of discharged matter. Immolation followed, kindling on the blown shields and driving deep into weakened hull-sections.

The *Aesrumnír* followed up with a vicious starboard broadside as it came about, hurling wave after wave of shells from its banks of heavy macrocannons. The Faash battleship drowned in the hits for a few seconds, rolling onto its flaming back and venting plasma in straggling plumes. It fired back, driving las-beams through its own cloak of gaseous discharge, but cobwebs of angry red had already snaked across its hull – portents of the eruptions within.

'Away!' commanded Jorin. 'That's enough!'

The Rout battleship pulled up and to high-starboard, straining every engine to generate distance between it and its victim. With

less than twenty kilometres between the two ships, the Dulanian reactor core ignited, blowing the ship out from the inside and shattering the chassis into a burning haze of shrapnel. A tide of distortion ripped out, screaming across the flaming void, destroying the countless smaller vessels caught up in its wake in a rapid-fire sequence of overloaded drive-trains.

The *Aesrumnír* was hit in the rolling impact wave and tilted hard over, straining its gravity generators and blowing lumens all across the tumbling bridge-vaults. Blasts echoed up from the lower decks, speaking of ruination down in the enginarium.

'Maintain course and speed!' roared Jorin, rocking in the throne as the ship suffered the blowback of its own kill. 'Prime lance for repeat fire, and give me another target!'

The burning corona of the Dulanian ship's demise passed over them, tearing at their void shield coverage but not penetrating. Solid debris, much of it still on fire, smacked and scraped across the hull, glittering brightly as the shields took the impacts.

The Wolves began to whoop, rejoicing at every crack of spinning wreckage, and the mortals joined them. They had learned how to kill the enemy – full-frontal application of overwhelming force, too fast to counter, too immense to withstand. There was no room for finesse with such a foe, only the savage vengeance of Fenris.

Suddenly, the bridge bucked again, hit harder this time. The voids flexed in a cascade of multi-hued stresses, and many of the crew lost their footing.

'That did not come from the enemy,' said Bulveye.

Jorin rose from the throne, scanning the local proximity augurs. 'Where in Hel–'

A second hit came in, far stronger, rocking the entire hull and dissolving three void shield sectors in a welter of dissolving ions. Warning klaxons kicked off, followed by a red rash of alert runes. The *Aesrumnír* lost loft, falling away towards the planet's gravity

well before emergency power boosted its subwarp thrusters.

The crew scrambled to compensate, swinging the main axis around and diverting power from the warp drives to get the void shields back up. More incoming alerts flashed across the sensor-lenses, one after the other, a whole barrage of projectile volleys.

For a moment Jorin could make no sense of it – the Dulanian ship had been alone, and the nearest vessel beyond it capable of dealing out such punishment was the…

'Blood of the Allfather,' he said, realising the truth. 'It's the *Blade of Numarc*.'

'Where did that strike come from?' demanded Russ, striding to the edge of the command platform, unwilling to believe the evidence of his senses.

'First Legion battle cruiser the *Blade of Numarc,* lord,' came Haelgrim's reply.

'You're sure?'

'Positive. And they're powering up to fire again.'

'Get us there,' snarled Russ. 'Now.'

Local space around the *Nidhoggur* was already clogged with the crashing ruins of burned-out starships. The Faash attack wings were still coming in hard, spearing through the drifting clouds of toxic plasma-burn and launching volleys of shield-shredding interference. Three Wolves destroyers had been demolished by such attack runs, their forward arrays blinded and pummelled until the void generators blew, leaving them open to being cut apart by las-fire and shell-hits. The planet's great defence halo was still intact – a vast ring of iron studded with shipkiller silos – and until its protective fleet was knocked out then it would not be seriously damaged.

The initial Wolves charge had driven a huge hole between the

enemy ranks, breaking apart their interwoven defence structures and leaving individual ships isolated and vulnerable. The *Nidhoggur* had already accounted for the destruction of two massive Dulanian cruiser-class ships, and had been gearing up to take on a third. The *Valkarn* had swung under the battlesphere's lowest point, dragging a score of defenders with it before powering up under the shadow of the halo to engage a cluster of Faash gunboats. Throughout it all, the First Legion capital ships had remained static, maintaining their long-range fire-ploy while offering no support to the onrushing Wolves vanguard.

Until a few moments ago, that was. The *Blade of Numarc* had suddenly lurched forwards, blasting its way in close and launching its main lance at the *Aesrumnír*. Other Dark Angels warships were closing in behind it, and even the colossal *Invincible Reason* had ignited its main drives.

Most of them were now bearing down on the Faash formations, but the shot from the *Blade of Numarc* had been no accident – readings indicated it was already angling to fire again.

'Get me the Lion!' raged Russ, as his own ship raced to close the distance down. 'And make sure he knows who wants him!'

The comms-crew scurried to comply, though in the midst of a frenzied void battle with hundreds of urgent inter-ship vox-bursts flying through the vacuum, securing the link would take a few more moments.

Meanwhile, the *Aesrumnír* was coming about, pulled hard from its onward rush into the enemy's central detachments and trying to respond to the sudden attack from its rear.

'It won't make the turn,' murmured Blackblood, watching the battle cruiser slew in the wake of its previous kill.

'Bring us in between them,' ordered Russ. 'All secondary power to void shields.'

The *Nidhoggur* roared into range, physically ramming aside a

wing of darting gunships before bursting into a clear patch and barrelling to intercept the *Aesrumnír*. Jorin's ship had been badly damaged by the first lance-strike, and a second hit risked crippling it.

The *Blade of Numarc*'s prow glistened as the lance-energies spat and writhed, ready to be unfettered.

'Faster!' Russ bellowed, raising his arms as if he could physically flay the ship into a final surge of speed.

The Dark Angels cruiser opened fire, and its blinding lance-beam speared into the darkness. Now hurtling at close to maximum velocity, the *Nidhoggur* roared into the gap between the two ships, taking the full force of the strike.

The lance impacted amidships, over the *Nidhoggur*'s spine. At such velocity, at such close range, the impact was horrific, sending the Wolves battleship careening and making every spar and strut scream. Four void shield sectors blew instantly, stripping the protection from the ship's back, and the internal power supply disintegrated, leaving only combat lumens to stave off utter darkness.

'I have the *Invincible Reason,* lord,' reported Haelgrim, looking up from his sparking comms station.

'My brother!' cried Russ, using the open channel. 'You are firing on your own kind. What madness is this?'

There was a crackle, a hiss of empty static, and then the voice that he had ever hated – rich, measured, cultivated. Every word of it seemed dripped in sourness, coloured with a cool disdain.

'*So you are here yourself, Leman*,' came the Lion's response. '*Now get your dogs on their leashes, or I shall bring them to heel myself*.'

The *Nidhoggur* was turning now, swinging back to hold position between the *Aesrumnír* and the oncoming *Blade of Numarc*. The odds had evened, but the *Invincible Reason* was not far out of

range, and its firepower dwarfed that of all others.

'Have you lost your mind?' Russ roared. 'The enemy stands before us!'

'*And you did not think to wait, did you?*' came the Lion's cool reply. '*Straight in, just as always, right for the jugular. You did not think to note that my ships had held back for a reason, since you never hold back. Perhaps you cannot.*'

The *Blade of Numarc* was readying for a third strike, but now Jorin's ship was also capable of striking back. Ludicrously, in the face of the swirling void battle around them, four of the finest Legion battleships in the engagement squared up to one another, readying to unleash their full payloads in an orgy of mutual destruction.

'My jarl killed that ship, since you would not engage it,' responded Russ. 'How can that grieve you?'

'*Because, my brother, we had boarded it. Ten squads of my finest, all of them nearing the bridge, ready to take it and turn its guns on the halo beyond. Now they are dead, their labour wasted. The commander of the* Blade of Numarc *sent them into battle, and was forced to watch as you condemned them, heeding no attempt to warn you off. Now he will have his vengeance, and how can I prevent him? If the situation were reversed, would you?*'

Russ froze. In an instant, everything changed. That was why the warships had been standing off. That was why only the escorts had been committed.

The comm-link hissed emptily. Blackblood waited. Russ' retinue waited. The bridge crew continued to ready for the assault, targeting weapon systems, organising running repairs, developing contingencies for another direct hit.

Jorin had now completed his manoeuvre and was in sight of the *Blade of Numarc*. Energy build-ups on his ship spoke of an imminent counter-attack, and the Dark Angels were doing likewise.

No Legion could suffer the humiliation of being stabbed in the back by one of its rivals. The insult was deadly, the risk to prestige mortal. They would have to fight. In the midst of the carnage around them, they would have to settle this, wasting their resources, their manpower, the precious opening already secured by the Lion's initial approach. In the blood and fire, all would be lost, and the Tyrant would still be laughing when the lances had emptied themselves.

'Stand down,' ordered Russ, hissing the order through gritted teeth.

Blackblood whirled to face him. 'Lord, they fired on–'

Helmschrot, racing to join them, voxed over him. '*We must blood them before–*'

'*I have a shot*,' confirmed Jorin, his voice distorted in fury. '*Lord, let me–*'

'Silence!' roared Russ, his voice making the suspensor-lumens shake. 'Defy the order and I'll break you all.' He switched his vox-channel back to the Lion's. 'Brother, you have been wronged. Call off the attack, and I will come before you myself to make amends.'

Blackblood stared at Russ, lost for words. All those in earshot stopped what they were doing, looked up, bewildered, as if they had been bewitched by some false spectre of their true liege lord.

I will come before you myself.

Neither the *Aesrumnír* nor the *Nidhoggur* opened fire. The *Blade of Numarc* had an open shot, a chance to slice through Jorin's ship and condemn him to death in the void, just as he had done to the Dark Angels boarding parties. The pause lasted for mere seconds, a tiny blip in the otherwise unrelenting slaughter around them. Lesser craft still engaged the true enemy, though in the absence of the greatest Imperial vessels their chances of survival were narrowing fast.

Waiting for the response, Russ curled his hands into tight fists,

feeling the blood thump in his temples. Every second passing made the situation more intolerable – he would have to fight, he would have to defend the honour of his jarl, right or wrong, just as they had done on the mortal ice.

Then the *Blade of Numarc* suddenly turned, swinging hard on its central axis and launching a fusillade at an approaching phalanx of Faash interceptors. The *Invincible Reason* switched course too, more ponderously, turning its attentions to a looming formation of Dulanian battle cruisers.

'*I will hold you to it,*' came the Lion's voice at last, as cold as before. '*But for now we have greater issues – that halo will end us if it cannot be disabled, and my ships are now drawn into combat. You have already destroyed my first attempt to neutralise it – perhaps you can suggest an alternative?*'

The sardonic words burned in Russ' ears. To be spoken to like that, in the hearing of his warriors, was an insult almost beyond parody, and his brother knew it. For an instant, a flash of fury rose up within him, and he saw himself countermanding the order, carving his way into the *Invincible Reason* and hammering a little fraternal courtesy into his haughty ally.

But the Lion was right. The delay in the onslaught had given space for the planet's defence grid to truly open up, and now a steady rain of las-beams and interference bolts was thudding out into the massed fleets, taking out ships with callous indifference.

Russ cut the link. 'Damn him,' he muttered, turning his gaze to the halo.

Its nearside curve ran away from the *Nidhoggur,* an immense sweep of iron and adamantium that circled the entire globe below. Tiny lights glinted on its darkened bulk, and rank upon rank of cannon batteries fired in a rolling sequence, pulverising any ships rash enough to expose themselves to its undiluted power.

Russ studied it, scanning the outlines, taking in the complexity

and the symmetry, and looking for any sign of weakness. The Lion was right: the halo held the key to the planetary defences – without it, the joint Legion fleets would hold the decisive advantage. Reducing it from the void, though, would take time, and all the while its gunnery was whittling away at their numerical superiority.

'All ships,' Russ announced, his mind made up. 'Withdraw from engagement and concentrate fire on the halo, coordinates to be transmitted.'

The fleet responded instantly, with every dark-grey vessel in the battlesphere pulling away from combat and readying to launch its payload. Russ calculated the fire-angles from sight, converting the displacement and making adjustment for the movement of the halo, then gave the coordinates to Haelgrim for transmission.

'Lord,' said Blackblood, warningly, 'We cannot knock it out quickly, not from here.'

'No, we cannot,' snarled Russ, striding from the throne and beckoning his warriors to follow. 'But we can punch a hole in those Hel-forged shields, and after that it's up to us.'

As he walked, he sent a second command, this time directed at the Legion garrison commanders rather than the ship-crews.

'Prepare yourselves,' he told them. 'On my mark, we go in.'

Jorin stormed down to the gunship hangars, his honour guard in train, their weapons unsheathed and swinging pendulously alongside their furious gait.

'So he left us to hang,' the jarl growled, his breathing heavy, his blood up.

Ulbrandr stalked beside him, his crow-black armour glistening from the corridor's lumen-strips, his crozius maul already beginning to simmer with energy.

'He had no choice, Bloodhowl. Save your anger for the enemy.'

They reached the hangar and saw the brace of Stormbirds already primed and streaming out on the rockcrete apron. Servitors clustered around their void drives, making final preparations before the chamber was depressurised and the void-lift would begin.

'I never saw it before,' Jorin went on, undeterred, striding out into the open towards his transport, the Stormbird *Heilmark*. 'He never stood down before a challenge.'

'He didn't stand down,' said Hemligjaga, wearily. 'He chose the true enemy, and ignored a pointless one. Gods of ice, jarl, you moan like a thrall-whelp.'

None but a priest, outside the strictures of the Great Company's rigid hierarchy, would have spoken thus to a Wolf Lord, but even then Jorin turned on him, bristling with barely contained battle-hunger. 'They near-crippled this ship,' he said in a low voice. 'There will have to be payment for that, one way or the other.'

By then the rest of the *Aesrumnír*'s complement had found its way to their ships, and the servitors were withdrawing, dragging their fuelling-cables and grav-locks with them. The gunships whined into primary lift-stage, their atmospheric engines readied, after which the outer shields of the hangar would slide open and the void drives would take over.

Hjalmar, Bulveye and the other warriors tramped up the embarkation ramps and into the bays within, reaching for the restraint harnesses. For all the sudden confusion caused by the *Blade of Numarc*'s attack, they were now doing what they had been conditioned for.

'Settle the debt when the fighting's done,' urged Ulbrandr. 'For now, channel that rage where it belongs.'

Then he departed for the smaller craft *Aelgar* with Hemligjaga, and Jorin took his place at the head of the Stormbird's crew-bay.

'Take us out,' he commanded, and the gunship began to push upwards even as the pistons closed the hull around them.

Massive blast-doors opened out at the hangar's entrance, exposing a vista of destruction in the open void beyond. A destroyer rolled past the aperture, its broken carcass leaking atmosphere, only to expose the immensity of the iron halo beyond.

Up close, its sheer size was daunting. At such range, its arc was barely detectable, and it presented as a gigantic wall in space, half a kilometre wide and nearly as deep. Its flanks were already a riot of cannon fire and incoming lance strikes, all concentrated at a single point where the rows of artillery gave way to what looked like a command station.

In the shaking crew-bay, warriors began to chant sagas of Fenris in thick, fervent voices. Others banged on the metal restraint cages, a rhythmic hammer to resemble the smacking of sword blades against shield-edges that had once marked the outbreak of the charge. The habitual pheromone-haze of kill-urge was laced with a darker trace-musk – that of an anger that went beyond the norm of battle preparation.

'Now comes the hour,' Jorin intoned, just as he did on the eve of every conflict, though this time with more than the usual venom. 'Now, my enemy, be the gates of Hel opened.'

The *Nidhoggur*'s void shields crackled into nothingness, and the gunships shot out into open space. Every warship in the vicinity had loosed its deadly cargo at the same time, and a gamut of troop-carriers headed from the safety of the starship hulls and into the maelstrom beyond.

At the same moment, the last coordinated lance-strike blazed down from the assembled Wolves battleships, cracking the halo's shielding over the command station in a snapping sequence of exploding energy-fields. The Stormbirds angled down like raptors, gunning hard for the opening, their cannons and heavy bolters tracking all sources of incoming fire.

Not all of them made it. The volume of return fire was dense and

well aimed, and the Faash gunships were just as apt to intercept the invaders as ever. A wall of close-range ordnance roared through the void, cutting down ships from both sides. In the confusion and the congestion some rammed into one another, blowing apart as their main engines detonated and spiralling helplessly into Dulan's upper atmosphere.

The *Heilmark*'s interior shook violently, pummelled by both las-fire and the backwash from nearby explosions. Jorin began to slam his axe-hilt against the deck, a repeated, deadening rhythm that was soon picked up by the other warriors around him. By the time the gunship had entered the kill-zone of the halo's static defences, the Wolves were banging out the drum beat in unison, roaring out their wrath in a growing crescendo of noise and fury.

Mor-kai, Mor-kai, Mor-kai.

More gunships were shot down, but there were only so many the Faash could interdict – the Wolves pilots were preternaturally skilful, guiding their vessels at full tilt through the narrowest of safe lanes and bringing them down to the halo's outer hull.

The *Heilmark* came in, held close to the metal by the massive down-draught of its engines, and the embarkation ramp hissed open.

Jorin was out first, maintaining the rhythmic chant from the interior. When the Wolves charged, their cries were most often a cacophony of raw emotion, designed to be overwhelming and disorientating in their sheer volume and energy, but this was different. The killers in grey burst from their fetters, each one repeating the same blood-chilling chant. Above them, the airless skies were filled with the pyrotechnics of void war – burning warships, blazing clouds of gas, the criss-cross brilliance of las-flares – but down on the halo's surface they were the huntsmen of old, racing in a grey tide, their blades beating time with the dread cry of impending slaughter.

Russ had marshalled all the strength that could be spared – thousands of warriors, the cream of two great companies, all landed across the halo's near curve and now all smashing their way inside. Lascutters and volkite chargers reduced the first defence walls into slag, after which krak grenades were hurled en masse into the breach. Scorning shields, the first warriors leapt into the tangle of debris, opening bolters to clear out the defenders within.

Jorin's pack was at the apex, crunching and slashing their way deep into the halo's interior and hunting for the command node itself.

Once within, the fighting became claustrophobic and brutal. Faash mech-troops spilled out of the darkness to meet them, their armoured bulk crackling with interference build-up. The Wolves split into running packs, chasing down the corridors in tight-packed units, and when they hit the oncoming enemy troops, the collisions made the deck shake. Soon the interior spaces were clogged with the sounds and stink of death and destruction, armour plates shattering, shield-units blowing, lenses smashed and flesh ripped.

Jorin pushed on hard, fighting his way down and down, his brothers with him. As the corridor-webs joined, split and rejoined, they linked up with other packs, and soon the deathly chant spread across the entire Wolves vanguard. Down in the echoing warrens of the halo's command nexus, all other sounds were drowned by the endless *Mor-kai, Mor-kai, Mor-kai,* a maddening refrain spat out from snarling vox-emitters, filling every aural implant, resounding within every helm, a relentless harbinger that redounded and overlapped and swelled as the grey tide surged onwards.

Soon helm-augurs signalled the approaching heart of the halo's command station. Resistance became desperate – Faash troops held intersections through barricades of their own dead, physically blocking the tunnels with burned-out walls of Scarabine armour. The Wolves cleared them out, one after the other. Heavy weapons

groups first loosed fusillades from lascannons and meltas, filling the narrow transit arteries and making the walls shimmer and glow. Then the infantry packs rushed them, vaulting through the barrage of crackling distortion fire with the death-chant still ringing. They dragged the Scarabine armour-shells aside, clearing avenues for more battle-brothers to charge through, and then the process started again, leaving corpses in both slate-grey and crimson lying twitching in its wake.

As the last of the barricades was blasted aside, Jorin's pack broke through into the command centre. A vast dome opened up before them, its apex humming with arcs of pale blue fulguration. Ranks of Faash Scarabines, hundreds of them, had dug into defence-trenches set across the wide floor, each of them armed with bulbous interference maulers. They protected what lay at the very centre – a ranked circular platform containing a command altar, crackling with energy, its flanks dancing with the electric beads of cogitator-work. Webs of heavy cabling laced out above and around it, feeding into armoured channels and power lines. Suspensor drones whizzed and darted through the tangle, scanning and chattering, before dropping back into the shadows of the immense cogitator banks.

From high up in the dome's roof, linked chain guns began to pump out rounds, tearing into the deck below. The Scarabines stayed in deep cover, firing incessantly from their gauntlet-mounted barrels. The command station rocked, illuminated by the flash and burst of muzzle-flare, weapons discharge turning the space into a cauldron of ear-bursting noise and heat.

Jorin went to ground, skidding behind the cover of a crater-ridden heap of semi-melted ironwork. Other packs were emerging all across the perimeter of the dome, bursting out of corridors beyond and running straight into the withering levels of return fire. They too scrabbled for cover, hunkering down to empty their own

weapons at the defensive positions. Soon the dome was awash with a symphony of bolter-volleys and interference fire, tearing up the decking strips and blowing apart the bulkheads, trench-tops and defence walls.

Jorin lay flat, firing without pause, his aim switching to lock on to any scrap of exposed mech-armour. Ammo-counters whirled down as the air filled with the stink and smoke of mass-reactive shells. This would be a grind, but the enemy had nowhere to go – for all their lines of defence, they were penned in on all sides, and sooner or later the concentration of firepower would gnaw away the rings of cover entirely, exposing them at last to the Wolves' full fury.

But then, right on the far side of the dome, thick wall-sections cracked open and cantilevered down. Two-metre-thick segments toppled forwards, crushing any legionaries stationed under them in a tidal wave of dust. From the wreckage emerged a giant, a glittering machine of ridged and segmented battleplate, greater in stature than a Leviathan Dreadnought but with the proportions of a Scarabine guardian. Its arms terminated in whirring spherical siege-drills, each one studded with snub-nosed interference launchers. Its armour plates shimmered with layers of protective shielding, and its chest-lodged helmplate glowed from a single slit-eye. Rocket launchers stacked up over its shoulders, already swivelling to seek targets, and its heavy clawed feet crunched deep into the decking below as it waded into the tempest.

'Interesting,' voxed Bulveye dryly, crouching close by Jorin behind a heap of blown slag. 'So they make bigger ones.'

Rockets were already screaming across to the leviathan and exploding harmlessly against its shield array. Then it opened fire from its shoulder-mounted launchers, and a whole swathe of Wolves positions disappeared in welters of crimson. Three warriors raced in close, their blades snarling with disruptor energy, and were

swatted aside by heavy swings of the two clubbed-arms. The leviathan swung about even as the grey-armoured bodies crashed to the deck, zeroing its interference barrels and blasting apart another two warriors. Then it waded forwards, shrugging off bolter-volleys and making for the centre of the command station. As it drew fire from the surrounding Wolves, the Scarabines took the opportunity to advance out of cover.

'*Skítja,*' cursed Jorin, pushing to his feet. 'This'll take some–'

He never finished. Even as he gained his feet, the entire chamber was rocked by a blast of ice-cold wind – a tearing, gnawing gale that skirled across the battlefield, ripping troopers from their positions and sending them cart-wheeling.

'*Leave it,*' came the command, resounding from every wall, from the height of the dome and the depths of the cogitator-shafts, as hard as hoar-frost.

In the storm's wake, Leman Russ strode out across the expanse, his pelts flying about him, the runes of his battleplate flaring like comet-fire. The wyrd's wind whipped and lashed, scouring the metal in eddies, catching on the edge of *Krakenmaw* in trailed flame-lines. His true-wolves bounded ahead on either side, blurs of white and grey, eating up the ground towards the lines of the enemy.

No bolt or shell slowed him. He did not race, he did not charge. He stalked towards the heart of the fighting like the storm's soul, massive and impenetrable, his coming wreathed in a psychic shock wave that burned out nerves, crippled hearts and paralysed limbs. The entire space seemed to shrink, to reel on its axis, to shudder and withdraw in his presence.

The leviathan levelled its gun-arms and opened fire. Russ met the impact with a contemptuous swipe of his chainsword, and the interference energy splashed across the wheeling blade, thrown into slivers and cast aside.

Russ came on, crunching a path towards the monster, smashing aside any Faash soldiers too stupefied or sluggish to get out of his path. Where the Dulanians were cowed by the oncoming hurricane, the Wolves were suddenly filled with a raw energy, and they rose up as one, launching themselves into combat with cries of '*Fenrys! Heidur Rus!*'

Russ came on, his blade hauled in great arcs, cleaving a path towards the towering creature before him. Every tread was deliberate, terrible, neither hastening nor relenting, as inexorable as the coming of winter.

The true-wolves reached the trenches, and tore through them, leaping at the throats of the retreating Scarabines and ripping them out. The leviathan swivelled to narrow the angle, then fired from its shoulder-mounts, sending streaks of contrails towards the primarch.

Russ pushed on through the explosions, the impacts cascading from his rune-warded battle-armour, his momentum unharmed. He broke into a run at last – a heavy, thudding charge that seemed to gather and amplify the storm winds, accelerating and augmenting them such that the impact, when it came, was like continents colliding.

The clash of chainsword against Faash-shield was horrific – a yowl and a shriek of tortured energy fields, ramped up amid the grinding cacophony of the whirring blades. For a moment the opposite forces held one another, the leviathan bringing its massive weight to bear on the warrior-lord, and yet somehow seeming *less* substantial, as if the soul before it were rooted in the very stuff of the universe itself, as eternal and imperishable as the stars.

So it was the shields that gave out first, flying apart in rippling curtains of trailing gauze. The monster's drill-gauntlets whirled round, aimed for Russ' neck, but by then the primarch had already moved, swiping at the nearest knee-joint. *Krakenmaw* tore through servos, driving into the leg and causing the entire machine to

stagger. Russ carved into it, sawing like a chirurgeon, tearing up its chest cavity and working ever deeper.

The leviathan swung back, finally landing a blow and smacking the chainsword out of contact. Russ held on to the blade, but no longer needed it. With his other hand, he grabbed the leviathan's wrist, and began to turn the siege-drill back against it. The leviathan pushed hard, straining against the primarch's grip, but even its machine-augmented motive force was not enough, and secondary power units shattered across its spine. Russ twisted the leviathan's arm further, bending the drills until they faced directly into the armour-suit's face. With a vicious shove that broke the pistons of its wrist-mounting, Russ drove the grinding blades straight down, tearing up the ablative plates and throwing up a fresh whirl of bloody static.

The leviathan's vox-augmitters sent out only screams now, before Russ silenced them with a final, savage down-thrust. He cast *Krakenmaw* aside, tore through the morass of ripped metal plating, and seized the still-living thing within – a human pilot, bloody, shackled with cranial-implants and neuro-bundles. Russ yanked him free, before holding the carcass aloft and shaking the last of the cabling from its limp remains.

'For the Allfather!' he thundered, hurling the broken pilot away and sending him slamming into the far wall of the dome.

The Wolves of Fenris responded with a deafening roar of their own and surged back into combat, driving the remaining Faash troops into their own barricades and a fresh round of slaughter.

Jorin looked up at his primarch, resplendent in the heart of the enemy's fortress, standing atop a hillock of smashed, bloody metal, and it took him back to the long years before the skies had cracked, when they had done this to so many other warlords, one by one, carving out the empire that they had thought then was the largest and mightiest that would ever be. Russ was still howling in

triumph, pouring out his frustration into the purest and most primeval expression of battle-rage.

Then Jorin laughed and raised his axe in salute.

'Leman of the Russ!' he cried, just as he had done in those long-gone days, recalling the name Thengir had given the infant, which had crystallised into the title that the whole galaxy knew him by. It was impossible to remain angry.

And then he was running again, hunting as he had always hunted, his axe blade thirsting, his eyes narrowing, the joy of the kill made anew in his soul.

It took much longer to neutralise the entire halo. Even many thousand Wolves were constrained by the huge internal distances, and so they fought from command station to command station, setting charges to destroy the weapon systems, hunting down the defenders, breaking apart everything in their path. More of the leviathans were encountered, and more dug-in phalanxes of Scarabine mech-warriors, and each strongpoint took the effort of many packs supported by heavy weapons teams to bring down. Wolves' hunter-packs commandeered rapid transit mag-trains to spread the incursion into every part of the huge orbital torc, backed up by fresh flights of dropships.

As the void-cannons slowly fell silent across the halo's face, lifters were able to get close enough to land yet more elements from the armoury – Land Raiders, Sicaran tanks, lumbering Dreadnoughts – which accelerated the rate of conquest. Once the destruction had started, it spread steadily, bleeding from one control point to the next until, from space, the halo looked like it had been infected by some voracious and terrible burning cancer.

As the construct's lethal external barrage dropped away, the void battle under its shadow turned too. The Lion's fleet, freed from the

need to retain distance, engaged the remaining Faash warships at closer range, bringing to bear their superior massed-fire capability. Of all of the Dark Angels ships, the *Invincible Reason* was by far the most destructive, accounting for dozens of cruiser-class targets and taking out the enemy flagship with a single, perfectly aimed lance strike. As the structure of the halo began to smoulder from the inside and the Wolves took to their gunships once more, the First Legion began the long and grinding task of winnowing out the surviving enemy craft, gradually seizing more and more of the void-space above Dulan, then securing it, then pressing for more.

Only when the last cannon had fired and the last piece of burning wreckage had twisted towards re-entry did the respective Legion fleets take up their orbital vantages again, each pulling back together into overwatch formation and facing one another across a wide expanse of debris-littered space. The Lion had brought the greater numbers with him – the Second, Sixth and Ninth Orders of his Legion – and outnumbered the Wolves by roughly a third. He had more ships, and in the *Invincible Reason* a far greater orbital killing power. In isolation, each Legion contingent would have been a match for the vast majority of conceivable foes. In concert, they were nigh unstoppable.

Russ had returned to the *Nidhoggur* among the very last of the warriors to leave, setting the final incendiary charges himself. On the bridge of the warship he summoned his jarls and his priests and his honour guard, and met them in the flagship's annulus chamber. There, in the flickering flight and under the hewn stones of the home world, he took off his helm, pushed his stiff hair free of its braids, and gave them a weary nod of acknowledgement.

'Tell me,' he said. 'Is there any way we could have handled this worse?'

A few scant chuckles issued from the Einherjar, but most faces remained stony. One battle had passed, another now loomed.

‘It is too great a dishonour,’ said Helmschrot. ‘You cannot go to him.’

‘We gave them the victory he wanted,’ added Blackblood. ‘War is war, and warriors die.’

Russ listened as they spoke, nodding, absorbing. ‘And you, Bloodhowl?’ he asked.

Jorin lifted his chin, holding his primarch’s gaze with a kind of defiant pride. ‘It should be me, if anyone,’ he said. ‘Order it, lord, and I’ll go there myself.’

Russ barked a hard-edged laugh. ‘Then you’d bury an axe in his chest, and the problem would get worse.’ He sighed deeply, scratching at his neck where the gorget seal had left a weal. ‘Hel’s winter, we have lived up to every foul rumour they have of us. I won’t have the blood between us turn sour. How bad could it be, to forget our pride for just a moment?’

The others looked doubtful.

‘Do not go,’ said Jorin, more firmly. ‘It was said in the heat of fighting, and they fired on us first. If we show them weakness now–’

‘Weakness!’ Russ snorted. ‘We show them weakness by hiding here and forswearing an oath.’ His expression became serious again. ‘You do not know him as I do. He would have destroyed your ship if he felt the slight to honour was sustained. We both have our codes of conduct, and that is his. He is a lord of knights, and we are the barbarians at his gates, and all must play their parts.’

He drew in a long breath, flexing his battle-weary shoulders.

‘Only one thing remains – the head of the Tyrant,’ he said. ‘That is still in our grasp, and I will not have it taken from me. He will have his plans, so we must force those to our will. We do not seek battles where there is no need, and I can acknowledge a mistake to my brother if he wishes it, so long as it is my hand that ends the campaign.’

He looked up, fixing his retainers with that blue-eyed stare, one by one.

'I'll take Helmschrot and Blackblood and Ulbrandr,' he said. 'More would be provocative, less would be reckless. You will keep your lips sealed and your blades sheathed, and try to behave as if you know more than brawling and beast-hunting.'

He grinned then, recklessly.

'It'll be fine,' he said. 'We'll get it over with, we'll get back to killing, and no one need ever speak of it again.'

They took the Stormbird *Helmgart* over from the *Nidhoggur* to the *Invincible Reason,* flanked by six Legion gunships. The escorts peeled away as the *Helmgart* slid under the shadow of the First Legion flagship. The *Helmgart* banked, dipped and entered into the beckoning hangar, touching down on a buffeting cushion of vented smog.

Russ descended the ramp, followed by his four companions. Ahead of them, Dark Angels stood waiting in battle order, several hundred, all arrayed in perfect parade-squares. Battle standards hung over the ranks, each one marking out a campaign of note. There were so many of them.

Servo-skulls droned overhead, dragging censers and masking the stench of promethium burners with their scent-trails. The huge hangar-space was only sparsely lit, and long, gloomy galleries ran along either wall, cut from age-darkened stone and decorated with the downcast images of robed warriors.

'He couldn't make it easy,' muttered Russ, looking out at the assembled phalanxes of Dark Angels. All of them wore their jet-black helms, but it was easy to imagine their expressions – contemptuous, aloof, curious.

Ahead of the front rank of legionaries stood the master of the

flagship himself, set apart, waiting with his right hand placed on the hilt of his sheathed longsword.

Lion El'Jonson, primarch of the First Legion Astartes, stood as he always stood – straight-backed, perfectly poised, chivalric dignity personified. Among the rediscovered sons of the Emperor he was among the tallest, though not as heavily built as his guest. Long, fair hair framed a pale face, one that had been raised under the penumbral eaves of eternal woods and away from sunlight. His eyes were the green of the forests, his face as lean as a hunting dog's. A thick sable cloak fell from his shoulders, lined with ermine and decorated at the hem with silver livery. His armour was a glossy black, and painstakingly engraved with the intricate inlay of heraldic devices.

This primarch, more so than perhaps any other, radiated a dark, sombre majesty, the calm presence of one born to rule and comfortable in the role. In another age he might have been an emperor in his own right, the undisputed ruler of a thousand worlds. Even in this Imperium he was the commander of the oldest and proudest of Legions, a regent to the one who had created them all, though the kingly aspect had not been diminished by time, remaining one of suzerainty, of domination, of command.

'Leman,' the Lion said as Russ approached him, bowing his head by a fraction.

'My brother,' said Russ. They did not clasp hands, much less embrace, and stiff suspicion hung between them.

'I will be honest,' said the Lion. 'I did not think you would come. So I give you credit for that. And I give you credit for your work in the void. Truly, your reputation does not flatter you.'

'We keep our promises,' Russ muttered. 'But tell me, how did you find this place? We'd been looking for months.'

'We've been out in the void for longer,' said the Lion, giving little away. 'And there were signs in the old annals, things to look

for.'

'You didn't think to tell us?'

'If you had asked, we would have considered it. But what does it matter now? We are both here, and that brings the victory closer. Once this is behind us, we can end the matter.'

'I have been hunting for Dulan since the order came from the Palace. My sons have died to bring him to heel.'

'As have mine,' said the Lion. 'Remember?'

Russ swallowed down the insult that leapt to his lips. 'There is more than honour at stake here.'

'Is that possible?' The question did not sound rhetorical. 'I know why you speak of this. We can discuss the war, and we can join our forces to combine their strengths, just as our father intended when He made us all so… different. But that is not the reason you have come. Must I remind you, or do you truly remember your oaths?'

Russ looked at his brother, and for a moment the prospect of drawing his blade, of taking *Krakenmaw* and ramming it down into that gilded breastplate was almost overwhelming. The two of them held one another's gaze, and it seemed as if the air became heavier somehow, like a thunderstorm on the cusp of breaking.

The ranks of Dark Angels made no move. Russ' retinue did not stir. The entire hangar remained silent.

And then, slowly, as if a cliff-face were grudgingly giving into the inevitable harrowing of time and tide, Leman Russ, the Wolf King of Fenris, moved closer to his brother and bowed his head.

'Let it be heard,' he said, a soft growl that nevertheless carried to all quarters. 'You were wronged. We wronged you. I come here for your pardon.'

The Lion smiled thinly, and finally extended his hands in greeting. He came forwards and took Russ by both arms.

'It is given,' he said, less sourly now, though still with that sonorous seriousness of purpose that seemed to mark his every

word. ‘For those are noble words.’

Russ gripped him back, making the embrace closer and dragging the Lion’s ear to his fanged mouth.

‘I said them for your knights,’ Russ hissed, now in his brother’s hearing alone. ‘I’ll add this, just between us – if you ever fire on my sons again, *boy*, I’ll rip your throat out and eat it. How do you like that oath?’

The Lion sprung back, startled. It looked as though he couldn’t be sure if it was a jest or not, and his expression tightened with sudden wariness.

But Russ laughed and clapped him on the shoulder, hard.

‘So now we’ve got that settled,’ he said, cheerfully. ‘I’m guessing you’ve already drawn up plans for the assault. How about you show them to me?’

Kloja’s repair details were still working hard many hours after the lance-strike on the *Aesrumnír* had done its damage. The beam had penetrated deep into the ship’s structure, driving a flame-edged well through deck after deck. Whole sections had depressurised and lost power, major cabling had been severed and coolant-tubes curtailed. Jorin’s boarding party returned to the ship to find the Mechanicum adepts deployed on every level, struggling to lock down the burgeoning fires and segment-failures.

If time had not been so pressing, his warriors would have joined the effort, lending their strength to the recovery squads, but that was not an option. The enemy would not be given time to regroup after the void-battering, and all knew that landings would be organised just as soon as the packs could re-arm.

While the majority of the company’s warriors headed down to the armouries, Jorin and Bulveye made their way up to Ulbrandr’s quarters, situated under the bridge in the battleship’s forward

sections, and the three of them gathered in the same chamber where Haraal's blood plasma had been so painstakingly examined, the doors locked behind them.

'So?' Jorin asked, resting his knuckles on the altar and giving Ulbrandr a jaded look. His battleplate looked no better than it had done after Ynniu – the running repairs had been overtaken by a fresh set of combat-marks.

Bulveye stood beside his master, a long gash opened up across his upper breastplate. He would be next to surrender his wargear to Kloja's armour-wrights, but other things had greater priority.

Ulbrandr looked at them both across the empty altar-top.

'None,' he said. 'Or none that I detected, Hemligjaga neither. The gene-seed has been taken from the slain and the cut-threads tallied.'

Jorin nodded. 'Good,' he said, with feeling. 'That was hard graft. If they all kept their heads, then–'

'But the numbers do not add up,' interrupted Ulbrandr. 'I have checked, checked again, sent my thralls back onto what remains of the station to run fresh scans, but unless fate has played some jest on us, or I am in error, we are missing warriors.'

Jorin straightened up. 'You're sure?'

'Bodies may be found, but the scans show nothing. We do not have enough kill-records, not enough marks of armour-destruction. And there is also this.' The priest summoned up a hololith of what looked like vid-footage, grainy and unstable. 'This was taken from the real-viewer records on the flagship.'

The images showed the underside of the halo during the fighting. Huge sections were tumbling planetwards, knocked out of orientation by the explosions within, creating a cloud of debris that drifted and clunked into itself. Las-fire from the ships above the halo's curve shot down through the clouds of smouldering metal.

'What am I looking for?' asked Jorin, watching carefully.

‘You’ll see it.’

As Jorin watched, the rain of shrapnel was joined, briefly, by a burst of what looked like thruster fire. Then there was another chunk of metal falling fast, though with less randomness, pulling clear of the rest and heading down towards the planet below.

‘They got a ship away,’ said Bulveye, grimly

‘They got more than one,’ said Ulbrandr. ‘This is a single visual feed angle.’

‘All should have been taken out,’ said Jorin.

‘Do not be foolish,’ said Ulbrandr, dismissively. ‘The flagship had a hole punched through it, and half the close-range guns were burning. Save your anger, for here is the fact – we have missing warriors, and the enemy got ships down to the surface before the end. You can work out the rest.’

Jorin shook his head. ‘They can only have corpses,’ he said. ‘None would have been taken while alive.’

Ulbrandr smiled a crooked smile. ‘They were a capable enemy. They lost their defence station, but they gained a captive or two, and that might be a trade they consider worth making.’

‘It won’t help them,’ said Bulveye. ‘Russ won’t halt the attack.’

‘He won’t,’ agreed Ulbrandr. ‘But the jarl is right – no warrior in his right mind would be taken alive. And so we are left with this prospect: what if they were *not* in their right mind?’

Silence fell across the chamber. Jorin looked at Bulveye. The priest said nothing.

‘You cannot be sure,’ Jorin said at last.

‘No, jarl.’

‘Can you track a life-signal?’ asked Bulveye.

‘Not from down here.’

Jorin pushed clear of the altar and paced between the columns. ‘You cannot be sure,’ he said again.

‘Tell the Wolf King, jarl,’ said Ulbrandr. ‘Tell him before this

becomes greater than you can control.'

'Tell him what?' snapped Jorin, turning on his Wolf Priest. 'We know not what the sickness is, nor if these warriors had it, nor even if they have them. What am I to say to him? Just whispers and half-truths. We will be at war again within hours, and you tell me to go to him with this, now, when he will need every blade at his side.'

'The jarl speaks true,' said Bulveye. 'This is not the time. Afterwards, perhaps, when all is done.'

'And all this time, they have warriors of our company,' said Ulbrandr.

'Then *find them,*' said Jorin. 'We will make planetfall, break the shielding and run the scans. If any of my company lives, then I shall tear their world apart to recover them.'

Ulbrandr shook his head. 'If they took them, they had a reason. You cannot give the enemy this weapon against us.'

'I give them no weapon.' Jorin reached out for the vid-control and closed down the hololith. 'You said it yourself – this is war, all is confusion, and yet you give me no proof, just suspicion. Send more teams onto the halo, run more scans, search for bodies. If you find none, make that your task on the surface. Find anything, even a sniff of one soul, and I swear I will fight with you across that whole Hel-spawned world to bring him back.'

For a moment longer, Ulbrandr held his ground. Then, slowly, he relented.

'You may have to,' he said, turning away to begin the search.

The council chamber on the *Invincible Reason* had been created to mimic those of Caliban's ancient fortresses. A marble floor, chequered and reflective, extended across a hexagonal room, lit from above by iron-framed lanterns. Candles burned atop heavy stands, dripping gently with melted wax. In every alcove stood

more of the ubiquitous graven images, stone-hewn and sombre. All movements brought an echo, repeated up into the high vaults – the clink of a knife on stone, the thud of ceramite boots on the marble, the scrape of an armoured finger across a data-slate screen.

There were no thrones. All stood – the Lion and Russ at the centre, their retinues around them. Facing the three Wolves of Fenris were three lords of Caliban – Gahael, Master of the Second Order; Moriaen, Master of the Sixth; and Alajos, honoured captain of the Ninth Order. All wore their armour, hung with trophies taken over decades of war. Though austere, the workmanship was superb. Everything on the ship was cast from the same mould, the product of minds raised on a world of night-terrors and high walls.

Between the assembled warriors hung a slow-spinning, spherical hololith, marked with the principal inhabited zones of the planet below. Dulan was a heavily urbanised world, with extensive areas dedicated to manufacturing and war-production. Enormous generators placed near the poles provided prodigious amounts of energy, much of which was devoted to the maintenance of huge shield-lenses protecting the main settlements.

'They have had time to prepare,' said the Lion, who had talked through the preliminary results of his Legion's augur scans. 'The Tyrant seems to have calculated that his fleet would not halt us for long, and so counted on mounting a land defence. Many of these structures look new.'

Russ studied the plans intently. Trench works and fortifications had been raised across the northern hemisphere, much of it encircling the power generators. 'What is this?' Russ asked, pointing to a concentration of spidery lines converging on a single point.

The Lion smiled. 'You see to the heart of it. That is the world's capital nexus. Here, we have orbital records.'

He flicked a finger, and translucent image-casts flickered into

life, floating over the points on the schematic below. One depicted a complex of walls, piled up upon one another, rising higher and higher amid natural sheer elevations. Causeways ran between the heights, joining up the circular footprints of what looked like defence towers. The image zoomed in, revealing files of artillery pieces placed along every ridge.

At the very centre of the construction, a mighty citadel thrust upwards, guarded on all sides by buttressed walls and crowned by a cluster of more defence towers. The earth around it all was a dull red, and the edifice above shared the same hue.

'The Crimson Fortress,' said the Lion. 'At least, so my remembrancers name it.'

Russ nodded, gauging the sizes, the entry points, the relative strengths. 'Formidable,' he said, his eyes flitting across the detailed aerial imagery. 'Rogal would be impressed. Or maybe jealous.'

'We calculate that it would take weeks to reduce the site from orbit,' said the Lion. 'Their shields, as you know, are hard to wear down.'

Russ looked up from the hololiths. 'But you are not suggesting that?'

'Every day we stay here deprives the Crusade of another conquest,' said the Lion. 'The *Invincible Reason* has gunnery capable of breaking sections of the shielding for long enough to make landings. Together, we have five Chapter's-worth assembled here. That should be enough for any target, do you not think?'

Russ looked at him carefully. 'One would be enough. Do not overcomplicate this, brother – we take the citadel, smiting the head from the beast. The rest can be handled by lesser forces.'

'Straight for the throat,' said the Lion. 'You do not disappoint. But consider the greater picture.'

The hololith zoomed out again, showing massed detachments of infantry, each many thousands strong, placed just a few kilometres

outside the main outline of the walls. As the image-scope continued to cycle up, more fortifications scrolled into view, some scarce less extensive than the Crimson Fortress itself.

'The entire region is militarised,' said the Lion. 'A path could be cleared to the centre, forces sent in, and they would be swiftly surrounded. Dulanian armoured infantry are inconvenient when massed in numbers, as you may have noticed. I suggest a little more circumspection.'

Russ raised an eyebrow. 'On whose part?'

The Lion smiled. 'Fear not – I have no wish to deprive you of your promised trophy.' He stabilised the image, which now showed three large defensive positions in addition to the central fortress complex. 'Before you arrived, we had already devised a strategy. Moriaen will take the Sixth Order into the eastern zone and establish a defensive perimeter along our right flank, digging in to prevent the enemy mounting a relief operation from the lowlands. Gahael will land to the north and destroy the generators, eventually depriving their atmospheric shields of power and allowing pinpoint orbital strikes. I will land to the west of the fortress, with Alajos and the Ninth, to take the lesser citadels, occupy the approaches and choke the main nexus of reinforcements.'

'And the fortress itself?' asked Russ.

'Yours, brother,' said the Lion. 'Before you came, I judged we had enough forces to mount the siege and then bring them to their knees in a week. Now, if you will it, the honour of taking the nexus may be yours from the first hour.'

'It was always mine,' growled Russ, defensively. 'It will be my blade that ends him.'

'If you wish. It is just another world.'

'No, not this one.' Russ lifted his gaze then, away from the hololith, up at the images, the architecture of Caliban. 'This is what you do – you conquer, one world after the other, until you can no

longer count them. I admire that, truly. Few do it better, but it is not what *we* were made for.' He moved back towards the tactical schema, as if he could reach out and rip it into shreds. 'Every world we burn is for vengeance. They are condemned, *he* is condemned, and we are the sanction.'

The Lion looked intrigued. 'Yes, I had heard you held this notion.'

Russ turned on him. 'Do not mock, brother.'

'No mockery, but you are right. I do not share your view of war. Perhaps our Father gave you a different task. For me, the order was simple – go out, harvest worlds for Terra. I carry no hatred for those who resist. I barely see them. They are numbers, objects, obstacles to be overcome. In the end the Great Crusade is all, and it stands or falls by our actions.'

Russ stared at his fellow primarch for a moment, weighing that up. The words had not been said for effect – he really thought that. In that instant, Russ had an insight into a wholly alien way of battle, one of long-gestated plans of conquest, of moderation and tactical restraint, ready to turn preserved resources back towards the service of a greater humanity.

They were of the same species, the two of them. They were even of the same gene-lineage, but just then it felt as if they might as well have been from other dimensions.

'Do you think,' Russ said, mulling the matter over in his mind, 'that Malcador knew we would meet here?'

The Lion raised an eyebrow. 'Why do you say so?'

Russ shook his head. 'Forget it.' He turned back to the tactical diagrams. 'These plans look good to me. You hold the ground, we cut his bloody head off.'

The Lion bowed in acquiescence.

'As you say, then,' he murmured, 'so shall it be.'

An hour later, the primarchs parted company. The two fleets pulled away from one another, taking up holding positions in high orbit. The last of the Faash defenders had been long since run down and a blockade established across the entire planetary zone, with both Dark Angels and Space Wolves escort runners patrolling across the poles and down to Dulan's equatorial swath.

Russ returned to the *Nidhoggur*. Orders were given to Helmschrot, who took them to the *Valkarn* and prepared his landing parties. Guns which until recently had been trained on enemy warships were re-armed and directed towards the shields on the surface. Soon a steady *thump, thump* of ordnance could be heard running through the bilge-levels of every capital ship as their arsenal was unleashed again.

Once the bombardment was under way, Russ returned to his private chambers to receive the last of his panoply of war – his master-crafted helm and the reconditioned *Krakenmaw*. As the servitors fussed and drilled, ensuring every joint was sealed and every power line securely fixed, a chime sounded from the doors outside the arming-room.

'Leave us,' said Russ, pleased to be rid of the attention. Once his attendants had limped away, he let the inner doors open, revealing Jorin standing on the far side of them.

'So we have them at last,' Russ said, beckoning him in, then taking up *Krakenmaw* and testing the weight of it. Fresh runes had been etched into the metal casing, warding against harm and magnifying the death-thirsty spirit of the blade. 'You could look happier about it.'

Jorin, also fully armoured, lumbered into the chamber and watched his primarch test the chainsword out. 'How was he?'

'Just as I remembered.' Russ stopped his practice strikes and lifted the killing edge towards his face, studying the spikes on the chain-run. 'We reached an understanding. He fights his way, we

fight ours.'

Jorin leaned against a column, crossing his arms. 'I liked it better when they fought on their own.'

Russ laughed. 'True enough.' He lowered the blade and sheathed it. 'But I admire him. I don't like him, but I admire him. Like I do Rogal. They have the same stiff neck, but they know how to run a Legion.' He shot Jorin a knowing look. 'Organised.'

Jorin snorted. 'You can't envy that.'

'I don't. Like I say, I admire it.' Russ picked up his helm, made battle-ready by the servitors. The lenses gazed back emptily at him, black as night. 'The galaxy looks at the Dark Angels and sees the Legions as they were meant to be. They're the archetype.'

'So what does he think of us?'

'Ha. Who knows? It matters not – we are what we are.'

Jorin looked at Russ steadily. 'A long time ago, you told me what you had learned of your coming to Fenris. You said it was fate that brought you to us, and fate that sent your brothers to their worlds. Like reunited with like, as the Allfather willed it. Now I wonder what would have happened if you had been sent to Caliban, and he had come to Fenris. Would I now be talking to a Wolf King, or would I see the Lord of Angels standing before me with runes hammered on his battleplate?'

'Your humours are strange tonight, Bloodhowl.'

'I only ask.'

Russ shrugged. 'Well, you have me, for better or worse.' He grinned broadly, exposing his blunt fangs. 'And that has not been so bad, has it? You remember when we burned the halls of Svein Rejksson? Two hundred under his war-banner, thirty under mine, and still we tore down his walls and dragged that banner through the bloody slush.'

Jorin remembered. 'A long time ago,' he said.

'I remember every cut. Not the battles since, but those on Fenris I

never forget. I'm glad you're still with me, Bloodhowl. The ones that came after you, they'll never know fighting like we did.'

'They've had their fair share.'

'Of a kind. But they're not my banner-bearers, like we had before the sky cracked.' Russ smiled to himself. 'I don't envy Jonson. All he has are subjects and seneschals. I have shield-brothers.' He put the helm down. 'That must remain,' he said, his voice unusually serious. 'The way of the old world. I don't want it forgotten, washed away by these new wars.'

'It won't happen.'

'It already *is* happening.'

'No, we can't shake it off, even if we wanted to.' Jorin looked moody. Perhaps it was the come-down after the heady exhilaration of killing. 'Fenris is a disease, lodged in our blood. We can't grow, we can't change, and she keeps us locked on the teat, even though the milk has soured.'

Russ stared at him then. 'By the gods, what ails you, Jorin?' he asked. 'This whelp-whining does not suit you, for I believed you to be a jarl of my company.'

Jorin didn't meet his gaze for a moment. Then it looked as if he wished to speak, but something kept his lips sealed. He sucked in a long breath, then exhaled, pushing away from the column.

He smiled – a forced grin.

'Forget it,' he said. 'Forget I spoke. The Angels make my humours as black as their battleplate, and I need to stretch my axe-arm again.'

Russ did not release him. 'Why did you come here? You had something you wished to say?'

Jorin shook his head. 'Only to hear what passed on the flagship. We retain the honour of the kill. Good. When the Tyrant's head is severed, I wish it to be our hands on the axe. So I am glad, and I am eager for it to begin.'

Still Russ did not release him. There was something else there, something running deep like a lead-lode under the Aett's roots.

But battle called again, close now, the culmination of a long hunt. It could wait, for much needed to be done.

'You can always come to me, you know this?' said Russ. 'You above all. You can speak to me, just like it was in the past, for I do not forget.'

Jorin nodded. 'I know it.'

Russ grinned at him, the hooked, reckless smile of old. 'Then come. Shake it off. I'll need you there, and I want this to be good hunting.'

'It will be,' said Jorin, nodding, without conviction. 'Just as always.'

IV

Orbital bombardment continued for three more hours, hammering away at the dropsite coordinates. Sensors from both fleets zeroed in on the impact zones, scanning for signs of weakening. Stress-signals were detected over the Crimson Fortress' causeways first, followed swiftly by the outlier regions. The battleships' drop pod racks were given warning, and every pack and squad took their places, locked down in restraint cages as the combat-lumens lit and the warning klaxons sounded.

The *Invincible Reason*'s bridge crew were first to pick up the telltale discharge of ionised particles, followed by the *Aesrumnír*'s gunnery teams. Precise loci were fed down to the targeting teams, and the pod-claws swung out into the open bays under the warships' hulls. Void shields rippled back, exposing the long drop into the atmosphere below, and for a moment the ranks of shackled pods hung like iron fruit under the holding rails.

Then the order was given, and the shackles flew back, the explosive bolts blew and the caskets of death plummeted in unison, thrusters blazing as they shot clear of the battleships and burned towards the red world below.

Gunships came after them, dipping their noses and blasting hard to keep in contact with the rain of pods. Ship-mounted las-fire opened up in their wake, scything down between the descent columns and cracking into sites on the ground, eliciting flurries of dust-blooms as the targets were hit. The drop was dizzying, precipitous – a whistling, shaking ride that spanned the vast gap between orbital fleet and planetside in seconds. Each pod glowed red, then orange, then a fiery white as it hit re-entry, edges blurred

from the immense pressures and speeds.

Inside the First Legion units the kill-squads remained silent, lost in their pre-combat meditation. Inside the VI Legion pods the warriors roared with exhilaration, thumping their armoured fists against the restraint cages and setting up the chorus of howls that would accompany their emergence onto the killing fields.

As the drop pods burned through the thickest atmospheric layer and the ground raced up to meet them, interference fire burst upwards from the defenders' terrestrial emplacements. Stricken pods exploded in mid-air, scattering outwards in huge blast-circles. Stormbirds homed in on the artillery units and let loose with battle-cannons, driving huge wedges through the lines of waiting guns.

Then the first drop pods hit, smashing deep into the planet's crust and throwing out roiling waves of dust, earth and pulverised rockcrete. The doors peeled open, exposing rack-mounted bolters that swung around, juddering as they let loose. Beneath that punishing curtain, the pods' restraint cages cracked, releasing their deadliest cargo. The Wolves and the Angels raced out under covering fire, adding their own mass-reactives to the torrents already homing in on the enemy positions.

Bridgeheads were established – points of territory won in the first bloody minutes of fighting. Legionaries pushed out rapidly from those enclaves, driving Scarabine counter-attacking troops back, joining up with their comrades, forming battlefronts and assessing the next objectives. The intensity of the sky-borne assault was ferocious – fast, coordinated, physically brutal, the epitome of the Legion doctrines of war.

In the wake of those initial gains, heavy transports began to land, now protected by coronas of ranged fire launched by ground-based troops. Tanks rolled out of the maws of the landers, engines growling and guns already tracking. Dreadnoughts, those most precious and scarce of battlefield resources, swaggered out of the

heart of their uniquely swollen drop pods, rotary cannons blazing and lightning claws extended.

Dulan's night sky became a mottled tapestry, underlit by flares and sudden freeze-frame blasts. Columns of fire still slanted down from the unseen void above, their barred purity marred by the contrails of rockets and gunship wings. The Scarabine elites pushed back hard against that first wave of attacks, wading through the hurricane of ordnance to get into contact, their shield units flaring in iridescent splash-patterns. Mobile artillery pieces of their own rolled out from behind camo-draped bunkers, their barrels lowered to near-ground-parallel and already rocking from recoil. Greater armoured walkers, akin to the leviathans found on the halo defence station, stalked out from the shadow of citadel walls, their shoulder-mounted launchers sending whirls of incendiary missiles twisting into the heart of the hardest fighting.

Both Scarabines and legionaries went down under those dense walls of fire. Others leapt up to take their place, and every new squad carried more deadly weapons – volkite chargers, heavy bolters, plasma cannons. Legion breacher teams hoisted shields and forced their way to the tops of the mounds of broken rockcrete, weathering the torrents of return fire, enabling fixed-point guns to be set up. Gradually, painfully, combined Dark Angels and Space Wolves landing vanguards cleared the ground around their impact sites, pushed out, took territory, and secured defensive points.

The Lion's forces did just as he had promised, seizing ground in a wide arc around the towering bulk of the Crimson Fortress. Their dropsites were concentrated around the very perimeter of the area cleared by the orbital bombardment, and they worked swiftly to secure the gains. Aegis defence-lines were brought down by heavily armoured cargo lifters. The causeways to the east and north were occupied and reinforced, cutting off the central massif from further reinforcements.

The Dark Angels primarch himself directed the fiercest fighting, carving out a position under the walls of three western citadels, each one scarcely less imposing than the Crimson Fortress itself. Ramps ran up to the gates of those citadels, overwatched by heavy ordnance and guarded by entire battalions of Faash Scarabines.

Before they could airlift their own fixed artillery, the Dark Angels endured a vicious wave of suppressing fire, losing whole squads in the initial exchanges. They might have faltered then, had it not been for their primarch, who led the first breakout charge from the dropsites, driving up the first of the ramps and storming the enemy positions at its summit.

In those opening minutes of the attack, when so much was at risk, the Lion was irresistible, moving too fast to be tracked by the heavy weapons, impervious to harm from small arms, a force of nature unleashed into the dirt-streaked skies of Dulan. Flames leapt up behind him as the skies were sliced by orbit-launched missiles. The primarch of the First was accompanied by his honour guard – Alajos and the elite paladins of the Ninth Order, each carrying force-shrouded longblades and blast-shields. When the Lion reached the first defenders, he leapt clear across the barricade-lines and crashed into the heart of them, laying about him with the immense *Lion Sword*. Every sweep was laced with a deep green surge of disruptor energy, one that kindled a rage of sudden fire on any surface it broke through, so that the Lion's onslaught was soon wreathed in tides of eerie flame, a bow-wave of shock and terror that swept on before him. Through it all he drove onwards, swift but never hurrying, the silence of his approach somehow as terrifying as if the screams of the underworld had come in his train.

Ahead of him lay the central one of the three secondary citadels he had pledged to storm. The walls rose up before him, precipitous and smooth, crowned with distant ramparts bristling with guns. Banners with the black-and-red dragon device of the Tyrant

whipped crazily in the buffeting counter-swells of artillery back-draughts, and the dark skies beyond the summit were shrieking by then, streaked with sooty columns of promethium smoke and lanced through with the retina-burning sizzle of las-beams.

The Lion crested the first summit of many that stood between him and the heights beyond. His retinue swept up around him, laying down a carpet of suppressive fire, and his banner-bearer raised the primarch's new standard – the great winged sword of the knights of Caliban, silver on a ground of forest-green, the icon of a hundred campaigns and the sign of doom for countless worlds. Dark Angels were now advancing in force on all fronts, whole columns of armoured legionaries sweeping out towards the heights as the wind whipped their cloaks and the flames licked against the walls themselves.

The Lion said nothing. He uttered no battle-cry, for his knights needed nothing to stoke their fury, and all orders had already been given. The primarch merely watched as the citadels were steadily invested, and the guns rolled into position, and his captains unerringly fought their way into their allotted locations. Alajos and his retinue stood sentinel around him, the ash drifting across their silent helms.

Then the guns on the ramparts above opened up, blowing up trenches in the terrain before them and churning the land to slag. Scarabine detachments erupted from trenches under the walls' shadow and surged across the broken terrain to meet the invader. Cumbersome Dulanian flyers whined up on turbofans, ready to launch strafing runs and unload their deadly cargo.

The Lion looked up at the gathering storm, and felt the presence at his back of thousands of his gene-sons, and knew that thousands more would be landed soon and thrown into the heart of the battle. He held his blade aloft, feeling the metal shiver as lightning caught and skipped along its length.

‘One more world,’ he said, softly, a ritual as old as the Crusade itself. ‘For you, Father, one more world.’

The drop pod doors slammed open, the burning night air of Dulan howled in, and a vista of burgeoning devastation stretched away in all directions. Over in the west, along the summit of a long line of ridges, the echoing report of massed bolter fire gave away the Lion’s position. To the east, a long way distant, more of the First Legion’s defensive lines could be made out.

But it was to the north that Russ’ gaze was drawn – steeply rising terrain, blackened by the scouring of fire. Whole swaths had been pummelled by the orbital fusillades, beating down the paths to the Crimson Fortress, now blotting out the northern horizon. Towers thrust tight against more towers, jostling for space, twisting around one another and merging into curtain walls and buttresses, bulwarks and ravelins, all rising and rising like the crags of Asaheim, and as red as bloody sunsets. It was colossal, testament to one man’s lust for dominance, a vanity made manifest in rockcrete, iron and adamantium.

But it was burning now, its ramparts and parapets masked with rolling cataracts of dirty smoke. The main lenses of shielding still protected the very summit, but the lower terraces had been mauled, and many of its terraced arches had slumped down into slopes of churned scree.

Now the way was clear for the infantry assault. Already the packs were running, loping out from beached drop pods and racing up the causeways towards the mighty gates, where the defenders streamed out to meet them. Energy weapons glowed in the firelit night, stabbing at the gloom like stars. With the first wave of warriors in place, the Legion’s airlifted armour trundled out into the open – Predator tanks swaying back on their tracks as their main

cannons opened up, Land Raiders grinding their way out across the scored ground. Above it all, gunships hung low, burning up down-thrust as they unleashed their full spectrum of murder.

Russ drew in a deep, deep breath, tasting the flavour of the world he was about to slaughter, feeling its fear on his lips. Freki and Geri bounded across the earth before him, slaver dripping from their open jaws. Bloodhowl had already commenced his advance up on the right flank. Helmschrot had run into heavy fighting on the left, but was forcing his way towards the first of the fortress gates. Russ' own forces were where he liked them to be – the centre, surrounded by the clamour of war on all sides.

Grimnir Blackblood was forging ahead, swinging his great maul in widening circles. Others of the Einherjar went with him, laying into the approaching enemy with waves of precise bolter fire. Lines of Scarabines became visible in the smog ahead, and beyond them the hazy outlines of towering walkers, their cockpit lights glowing through the kicked-up murk.

Russ broke into a heavy run, drawing *Krakenmaw*. The first of his prey emerged, lumbering into bolter range of Blackblood's packs, their shield units flexing and flaring. They didn't see his charge until it was too late, and then he was among them, laying about him with the growling chainsword. *Krakenmaw* sliced through both shield and armour, trailing electric explosions across the wide parabola of the strike. Russ started to laugh, though the sound erupted from his helm's vox-unit as a kind of bestial slurring, thick with white-noise. He killed and killed, smashing the bodies aside and hurling them into the air. Every kill-stroke brought forth a fresh cry of triumph, radiating out like a shock wave.

He drove the vanguard onwards, and they reached the foot of the causeway. The tank-groups had reached their forward positions by then, and were sending waves of shells slamming into the fortress' walls. All the while, heavier ordnance was trundling into range –

siege guns, bombards, graviton platforms and ever-heavier tracked units. The enemy gun-points, mounted high up along the distant ramparts, returned sporadic fire, hurling mortar shells and interference clusters into the oncoming tide, but the volume of it did little to dent the massive and growing momentum of the Wolves' charge.

The first hunt-packs reached bolter-range of the first gates – vast creations of granite and banded adamantium, framed by columns the width of a Titan and capped by the immense icon of the Tyrant. Thickets of las-fire angled down from shielded points, forming a lattice of intersecting crossfire that punched through smoke and made the air boil. A squadron of Land Raiders attempting to force a passage towards the sealed doors was caught in the maelstrom and cut apart, their armour plate buckling and their tracks sliced to ribbons. The ground beyond them boiled with fresh Scarabine divisions, swarming out of hidden bolt-holes and lumbering up to engage.

'Hold!' roared Russ, reaching a low ridge to the south of the gates.

His forces formed up around him, raising the banners of the VI Legion against the precipitous heights. Fresh squadrons of armour ground as close as they dared, opening up against the surrounding wall sections but remaining wary of the kill-zone in front of the portal itself.

Blackblood limped up to his primarch, his armour covered in scorch-marks. 'It'll take some cracking,' he said.

Russ checked the battlefield schema on his helm display, assessing the deployments, the drop-zones, the forward movements. The Dark Angels were making impressive progress, locking down their beachheads and spreading out to take new ground. Both Bloodhowl and Helmschrot were moving towards their respective flank targets at speed, carving up territory as if in a bid to out-do

one another. Both jarls were sweeping back inwards now, devouring the ranks of enemy infantry out in the open before aiming to join up with their primarch. All that speed would be wasted, however, if the gates remained shut.

'Oh, they'll break now,' said Russ, noting the set of runic location-markers creeping up on his tactical display. 'You'll enjoy this.'

As the words left his mouth, the ground beneath them began to vibrate. This wasn't the erratic rhythm of shells exploding, but the growling hammer-strike of engines, huge engines, massed and overlapping in a gathering crescendo of earth-shaking intensity.

The first rank of them swaggered into view – thirty Typhon siege tanks, their smokestacks belching as they reached their designated fire-points along the crest of the ridge. In their wake came the truly enormous fortress-reducers – ten Legion Shadowsword units, each one bearing a single Volcano cannon, shrouded in ribbons of smoke and swaying heavily. The superheavies crunched and crushed their way across the fields of the fighting and the slain, propelled onwards through the ash and mud by their enormous drive trains.

'Iron Priest,' voxed Russ. 'Is all to your satisfaction?'

Kloja's voice crackled back over the link. '*Comms are jamming, lord. But I work on it, and I hear you now.*'

'Then give the order.'

The last of the tanks sank down into position, their tracks locking tight and their core power shunting from forward motion to gunnery control. The enemy spied the danger, and the density of las-fire picked up, but it merely pinged and skipped across the superheavies' thick armour, doing little to hamper their preparations.

Then Kloja gave the command.

Even through reactive helm lenses, even with auditory feeds dampened, the detonation generated sensory overload. The air

blazed white, the ground reeled; towering plumes of smoke erupted from every barrel, swirling up into towering columns of darkness, under which leapt spears of fire, one after the other, a symphony of repeated, hammer-hard cannonades.

The fortress gates disappeared behind a roiling swell of explosions. Their foundations shivered and their ramparts crashed into toppling cascades of rockcrete powder. The las-fire kept coming back, piercing through the cavalcade of destruction, but it was now swamped by the maelstrom being unleashed ahead of it. Round after round struck home, then another, then another, each dispatched with fearful, metronomic timing. Smoke-trails boiled and multiplied, clogging everything with ash.

Still the gates held. The iron bands melted, the granite blew apart, the mighty door-shafts cracked, but the core remained defiantly intact.

'More!' laughed Russ, revelling in the display of power, the unfurling of the Legion's awesome potential. The long months of pursuit, of engagement after engagement on other worlds, each one getting them only slightly closer, accompanied by the taunts and goads of the self-styled Tyrant, were coming to an end. He could almost feel that throat within his grasp now, and the sight of terror in the mortal's eyes as Morkai came for him. Everything else – the conquest of the Dulanian worlds, the extension of the Imperium, the long process of compliance and restoration – all of that meant nothing. As it ever was for him, the fight was personal, a settling of scores, the blood-debt of ages.

The barrage at the gates accelerated further, making the adamantium shimmer with heat. More cracks snaked across the main panels, glowing from within as the superheated structure began to buckle.

Helmschrot's location markers were closing fast, sweeping under the shadow of the western wall and driving all before them.

Bloodhowl was not far behind – he would be at the head of the causeway within minutes.

Then, with a deep, earth-juddering boom, the first break came. More shells lanced in, smacking hard up against the fault-line, and the breach widened. Flames spilled from the gap, tumbling in liquid clots down the shaking walls. Snaps rang out, sharp and resounding. The right-hand pier collapsed, blasted apart, showering the approach with a rain of heavy masonry-clumps. Bereft of support, the left-hand pillars went next, imploding under the ceaseless barrage and crumpling like hammered steel. The gun-points on the ramparts plummeted in the gates' ruin, the screams of the operators lost in the sliding tumult.

Then the bombardment stopped.

For a few moments, as the mountainous palls of smoke drifted upwards, the air was thick with sudden silence, only broken by the distant sounds of approaching warfare. A vast cloud of dust and debris drifted lazily back to earth, slowly dissipating. As the clouds parted, the vista of ruin was revealed – a gaping hole where there had earlier been turrets, choked with the blown, charred wreckage of the fortress' defences.

Russ was first up, brandishing *Krakenmaw*.

'To me, Vlka Fenryka!' he thundered, racing down the ridge's slope with his true-wolves in train, his pelts flying behind him.

Like a rising surge of winter seas, the Rout answered the call, swarming across the still-burning terrain and clambering up the thickets of struts and bracings. The Legion's artillery fire recommenced, angled more steeply now and sent spinning over the heads of the onrushing infantry. The tanks started their remorseless crawl again, hauling their way through the residue of their earlier ranged assault and tracking for targets in the murk ahead. The gunships pulled up higher, heedless of the weakened gunnery still tracing them and sending heavy bolter fire scything into the

fortress' exposed innards.

But none were faster than their master. Leman Russ ascended the last slopes of detritus, Freki and Geri loping beside him, his chainsword whirring, and broke through the ruined gates. Ignoring the thinned-out clouds of las-fire that danced across the rubble, he angled his blade towards the topmost tower, still standing proud above a sea of flame and smog.

'Cower now, Tyrant of Dulan,' Russ snarled, striding across the threshold and into the Crimson Fortress. 'Your slayer has your scent – no hiding place remains.'

Jorin buried his axe deep into the chest of a Scarabine mech-warrior. The shields blew out at last, and the warrior spasmed on the blade, limbs twitching. The jarl wrenched back, only for the Faash trooper to clutch at him, reaching for his weapon arm with a sparking gauntlet.

Infuriated, Jorin lashed out again, severing the arm at the elbow. He hacked down, then once more, pummelling the Scarabine and reducing it to a broken collection of armour-shards.

'What do you have to *do?*' he growled, striding clear of the debris.

'Something like that,' observed Bulveye, fighting at his shoulder.

The two of them pushed onwards, poised at the head of the company's advance. The fortress' smouldering gates reared up above and around them, shrouded in burning clots of dust. A Fire Raptor thudded overhead, blazing steadily from its gun-mounts as it pushed on into the semi-ruined citadel.

Ulbrandr led a pack up towards the right flank, skirting the ruined feet of the gate-edges and driving hard into the debris beyond. Hjalmar took another pack up the opposing flank, hunting for Scarabine units still dug-in to the ruins. The earlier

bombardment had been thorough and sustained, reducing even the most stalwart edifices to little more than heaps of rubble, but the mangled terrain slowed the infantry advance, and it offered a thousand hiding places for snipers and counter-attacking kill teams.

Jorin crouched down behind a Rhino-sized lump of toppled rockcrete, taking a moment to assess the tactical schema. Bulveye ordered the pack to run ahead, then came to join him.

'The primarch makes swift progress,' said Jorin, studying his augur-lens and noting the rune-clusters advancing across the city map. 'Helmschrot will be with him soon.'

Bulveye glanced at the data, then bobbed up above the cover-line to loose a series of bolt-shells. He slid back down as the return fire came in, now poorly aimed and panicky. 'Then we need to be quicker.'

Jorin nodded. 'That can be done.'

He pushed out of cover, leaping over the rubble-screen, and sprinted out into open ground. On either side of him, rubble-slumped towers marched up the steep inclines, some now levelled to half-height, others tottering on their mauled foundations. Russ had driven a line of fire straight up the centre, making use of his tanks to smash through the solid defences before sending the infantry in to clear out the ruins.

Roofless buildings reared up around them, black-edged, most burning. The streets ahead were narrow and treacherous, carved out of the red stone and the red dust that made the whole planet seem like a wound. The company filtered through the myriad paths, forced to fight at every crossroads and open plaza. Resistance became dogged as the surviving defenders rallied ahead of them, and the pace slowed, degrading into an exhausting grind of heavy axe-work amid the barricades and fox-holes. By the time the sector was cleared out and the next advance under way, Ulbrandr had returned to Jorin's side. The priest's crozius was black with

carbonised bloodstains.

'Jarl, I have what you asked for,' he said.

Jorin paused, drawing closer. 'Tell me where.'

Ulbrandr ducked down to avoid a rogue flash of las-fire from the battle-lines further up.

'The sensors are scrambled,' he said, crouching down in the lee of a half-demolished wall. 'Comms are poor, but I found a life-marker.'

'Where?'

Ulbrandr showed him the augur-scan. A blip, no more than a tiny point of light, glowed less than five kilometres away to the east, still within the fortress limits but buried in its labyrinthine outer levels. 'It'll take us out of our way.'

Jorin calculated the distances. The scan showed a route – a difficult route, but a possible one – snaking under the battlements of the higher levels, overlooked by much of the citadel's surviving gun-towers. 'Hel,' he breathed.

'You have to decide now,' said Ulbrandr. 'Russ has already reached the inner gates. He'll want us with him.'

Jorin wanted to be there too, right at the culmination of the months-long hunt, but he had already sworn. 'And this signal, it endures?' he asked.

'For now.'

'Then lead the company,' he said. 'I will take Bulveye and three packs. Fight to the primarch's side – I will join you when I can.'

Ulbrandr nodded. 'Be swift, then. This thing draws to its closing.'

Helmschrot led his vanguard into the carcass of the broken hall. The space had once been large – a wide floor had been flanked by rows of supporting pillars, each draped with the ubiquitous dragon

banners. Perhaps it had been ceremonial, a place to bring the vaunted Dulanian warrior cadres to receive honours, though now its lustre had departed forever. The roof had been blown open, exposing warriors gathering within to the burning skies above. They trod now around a jumble of collapsed girders and pulverised marble, the walls pockmarked from bolter-impacts, the banners ripped away or burned from where they had been hung.

From beyond the broken walls, the heavy growl of tank engines could be heard heading up the steep and winding streets, grinding the stone flags under their tracks. The thud of mortar fire was now remorseless, punctuating the staccato rattle of small-arms fire.

Russ was waiting for his jarl. His true-wolves were with him, their fur thick with dust, their jaws glistening. Ogvai saluted, then looked around him at the full extent of the devastation. 'Enjoyable, lord?' he asked.

Russ crunched his way across the rubble. 'Immensely. How goes it?'

'They don't run,' said Ogvai, shaking his axe blade down. 'That saves time.'

From higher up the fortress' precipitous slopes, muffled booms rang out, making the floor shake and the walls shower down more debris. Russ started to pace, impatiently, reaching out to his wolves.

'No Bloodhowl,' he muttered, perturbed. 'Why are the pack-comms blocked? Has he voxed you?'

Before Ogvai could answer, the Rune Priest Heoroth arrived, striding through a bombed-out doorway on the eastern edge of the hall complex. '*Hailir*, Wolf King,' he said, bowing.

'And?' asked Russ, impatiently. 'My jarl?'

'Ulbrandr approaches.'

Russ gripped Freki's nape, and dug his fingers in deep. 'I asked for Bloodhowl.'

'The jarl is not with him.'

Helmschrot issued a low snarl of frustration. ‘He’d better be dead, then. If he’s gone his own way–’

‘I need him here,’ said Russ, simply.

‘His forces are advancing.’

‘I don’t need his *forces,* I need *him*. Morkai’s bones, he has been in strange temper from the start of this.’ Russ whirled around, issuing more orders over the comm, which hissed with the interference that had dogged them since landing.

‘We need not wait,’ said Helmschrot. ‘The last tier is within our grasp.’

Russ looked up at him. ‘You asked if I saw some fault in them,’ he said. ‘I hoped not to. I hoped that this would make me surer of it.’ He spat out a curse. ‘How far back has he fallen?’

‘He’s taken his retinue into the eastern quarter,’ said Heoroth.

‘Then not far,’ said Russ, summoning Blackblood with a wave.

‘Lord, let him go,’ said Helmschrot. ‘We have the numbers. We cannot risk–’

‘Letting the Tyrant out?’ Russ laughed. ‘Where will he escape to? His skies are ours, his walls are gone. He will keep. I have my own house to put in order first.’

Blackblood stomped over, along with the rest of the Einherjar. ‘Your command?’

‘You, with me,’ ordered Russ, indicating Blackblood and the two packs with him. ‘And you,’ he said to Helmschrot, ‘secure this sector. Bring the armour up to the next level and commence bombardment of the upper city, but do not break in. Not yet.’

The primarch started moving, his wolves slinking along with him, a dangerous urgency in his gait.

‘He was given a command,’ Russ growled. ‘If I have to crack his skull open to do it, he *will* learn to obey it.’

Chapter Master Alajos brushed the residue of combat from his pauldrons before entering the chamber. Everything within the citadel's upper tiers was now coated with bloody dust. The air was thick with it, a cloud of filth that clogged rebreathers and made vehicle engines stutter. The Dark Angels had reduced half of the structures around them to craters, and the rest stood starkly amid a wasteland of corpses and burned-out tank hulls, their symmetry gone and their empty hearts exposed to the flame-laced wind.

The worst of the grime removed, he gestured to his retinue, and the doors were flung open. Alajos entered what had once been the topmost chamber of the captured citadel. Its slender windows had been blown out during the first mortar strikes and glass was strewn across the floor in glittering heaps. Under the empty stone lintels he could see out towards the east, far across the lowlands and over to the greater mass of the Crimson Fortress. Waves of smoke churned up thickly from its lower levels to its summit, fuelled by burst promethium tanks and the flammable remains of the bastion's armouries.

The Lion stood next to the remnants of an ornate desk of some description, heavy-columned and topped with pearl-coloured stone. Dulanian corpses, both armoured and in civilian robes, lay across the floor, disfigured by bolter-shell exit wounds. More legionaries stood at the chamber's edges, standing vigil over the empty windows.

The Lion looked up as Alajos approached.

'Tidings from Gahael,' the primarch announced.

Alajos made his salute, ensuring that none of his weariness was evident in the gesture. The battle for the citadel had been conducted at speed, but much of the fighting had still been vicious.

'He is victorious, then,' said Alajos.

'The shield generators are taken,' said the Lion, sounding satisfied. 'Come, you will wish to see this.'

The two of them walked over to the chamber's eastern wall, from where the carnage beyond could be witnessed through the gaping window frames. First Legion Stormbirds circled the occupied citadel heights, hunting for the last pockets of resistance. Out across the plains, tank-groups were forcing their way east and south, closing off approach routes and setting up barriers to any possible counter-attack.

The night had reached its nadir. No stars shone under the heavy layers of cloud, and the spreading fires painted the landscape a deeper red, like hot, rusted metal. The outline of the Crimson Fortress piled up against the eastern horizon, mountainous, its flanks set dark against the movement of flames. Until that moment, the summit of that fortress had been sheathed in the translucent screens of void shields, making the only access to the upper reaches through the many terraced levels below. Now, even as Alajos and his primarch watched, the air above the fortress flexed, guttered, and then snapped into darkness, its protective shroud extinguished like a snuffed candle-flame.

'Gahael has excelled,' Alajos said, with feeling. He knew just how well defended the generator zones had been, and how hard Gahael must have fought to take them.

'Indeed so,' said the Lion. 'But this is not yet over.'

The primarch summoned a tactical hololith, spread wide over the entire combat zone. Dozens of runes marked the main deployments, showing the Ninth Order's current disposition within the captured citadel, and Gahael's movements far to the north. In the extreme east, past the Crimson Fortress and far out into the wastes beyond, Moriaen's detachments were indicated. They had remained static, hemmed in to their dropsites and unable to break out.

'Just as we planned for,' said the Lion, grimly. 'They are massing there already, looking to relieve the fortress from the east.'

'Moriaen will hold them.'

‘Perhaps. It would be better if he didn’t have to.’ The primarch called out to one of his aides, Orfeo, a robed and ancient mortal weighed down with data-slates and communications devices. ‘How does my brother progress?’

Orfeo double checked his sensor-readings. ‘The Wolves are stalled, my lord. No movement. Indications are that they reached the penultimate level, then stopped.’

Alajos digested that. The fortress’ most formidable defences had looked to be on the perimeter, and those had been broken. It was rare for the Wolves to pause in their onslaught. At least, that was what their reputation had always suggested.

The Lion gazed back out through the empty window, and his dark helm reflected the firelight. ‘We could end this now,’ he said, thoughtfully. ‘The shields are down – we could teleport into the sanctum, cut off the head. The whole thing could be brought to a close.’

‘True,’ said Alajos, carefully. ‘But it is the Wolf King’s prize.’

The Lion laughed. ‘Is this then some game, for the sport of children? The longer it lasts, the more pressed Moriaen will be.’

The primarch glanced back at the tactical read-outs. The position was poised – the early gains had been massive, but loss of momentum could yet turn the assault into a quagmire. An entire planet’s resources had been mobilised and were racing back towards the fortress, millions of men, all with a single objective.

And there was an efficient way out, a clean kill on offer. They knew where the Tyrant was, and they had stripped the last of his defences from him.

‘Can the Wolves not make the same move?’ asked Alajos, uncertain.

Orfeo sniffed. ‘It is rumoured that they dislike teleportation.’

The Lion shook his head. ‘They would do it if they needed to, but they are locked down. Something holds them back. Can we open a

channel to my brother?'

Orfeo looked doubtful. 'The fortress is in static, some interference. I doubt their comms are functioning well either.'

The Lion let out an irritated breath. 'And all the while we have the chance, there, waiting.' His fingers played along the hilt of his sword, still in its scabbard.

Alajos didn't like the sound of that. He'd seen the way the Wolf King had been in the council on the *Invincible Reason* – burning with a scarce-contained zeal for completion, obsessive about the goal in a way that no son of Caliban could ever be. It was not pride, but *necessity*. Those few hours had told Alajos everything he needed to know about the two primarchs and their essential differences. The Lion was a monarch, a tamer of beasts, a master of cities. Russ was a weapon, a controlled explosion, a bringer of frenzy.

So it would matter, if the prey were taken from him. It would matter a great deal.

'If you ask for my counsel, lord,' Alajos said, 'we should contact them. Inform Russ that the way is clear, let him take the chance. We have fighting enough here, and Moriaen must be reinforced.'

The Lion did not respond at once. Alajos had seen him like this on other occasions – an opening had presented itself, just as in a duel when the opposing swordsman suddenly dropped his guard. The genius for exploiting any opportunity was what had made him the master of Caliban, and still marked his rapid rise through the ranks of the Great Crusade's most renowned generals, perhaps one day even to rival Horus and Guilliman. The Lion cared about that reputation, and about the tally of victories marked by the Crusader Host on Terra.

Eventually, the Lion turned away from the fortress, back to Orfeo and his strategos, but his hand never left his sword-hilt.

'Try to reach him,' the primarch told Orfeo. 'Inform him the

summit is open to attack by warp-transportation, if he is not yet aware.' He let slip a wry laugh. 'And, if you fancy your luck, tell him we stand ready to assist.'

Alajos relaxed, though only by a fraction. 'And if he cannot be reached?'

The Lion shrugged. His gaze seemed to be drawn back towards the east, over to the Crimson Fortress, as if pulled there by some irresistible force of gravity.

'We wait,' he said. 'For now.'

The further east they pushed, the heavier the fighting got. The fortress' Scarabines remained resolute, leaving no barricade unmanned and contesting every intersection. Jorin, Bulveye and the three hunting packs went as swiftly as they were able, no longer attempting to destroy all before them but simply to reach their destination in time. The Faash troops, once they realised the VI Legion's heavy armour was still moving north towards the summit, closed in on them, launching attack after attack from the cover of their bomb-ravaged buildings.

Still running, Jorin veered past the explosions as they went off, using every scrap of the battle-sense he'd been born with. Each passing moment made his decision seem more of a betrayal, a dereliction of the oaths he'd sworn a mortal generation ago. There could be no justification for leaving the battlefront when ordered to push on. If he'd told his liege lord the truth, perhaps that would have been different, but the layers of secrecy had grown, overlapping over one another until the dark core at the heart of his company had swelled to drive all other considerations out.

The fear, the one that had nagged at him since Haraal's discovery, had never left. They had all experienced the trial of the beast, out in the wilds with the searing pain of the Canis Helix

burning through their blood. He remembered it more clearly than most, having been older and closer to death. For all of them there had been that single, terrible point where the paths of life had bisected, stretching on one hand back into the world of humanity, and on the other into the oblivion of the feral. It had seemed then as if the choice would never be faced again – they had stared it in the eye and beaten it, and emerged on the other side.

But now that had changed. The possibility loomed that they would never be free of the trials, and that at any moment the pain might return, dragging them back into themselves and destroying the veneer of humanity that kept the beast at bay. For the wolf brothers, for Dekk-Tra, the ones who had undergone the trials late, that chance seemed the most perilous of all. Jorin had never regretted his decision before, and nor had Bulveye, nor any of the others who had dared it. Death with honour or immortality in glory, that had seemed like the choice, and one they had all made with their eyes open and their soul laughing.

Not now. There was a third possibility – regression into something far worse, as wretched as the failures out in the wilds of Asaheim, who were then hunted, or who scraped a life of pain and madness until the poisons of the Helix at last dragged them into oblivion. And so the secret had to be kept, at least until they could be sure what was at work. If a flaw existed, it might be cured, given time, given understanding, and in the meantime the signs could be hidden and the knowledge contained, even at the price of ignoring a liege lord's command.

Their destination neared now, and the buildings flitted by in a blur of shadow and flame. He leapt across the landscapes of dereliction, paying no heed to the shooting pains in his combat-fatigued muscles. He fought on, striking down any who came before him, dispatching them with an urgency that had not been present even in those last moments on the hunter-killer.

He had never gone against Russ when they had both believed themselves mortals. Only now, after they had each been elevated to the state of demigods, had the rift slowly grown. Perhaps the bridge could never have been crossed. Perhaps the doubters had been right, and the wolf brothers should have remained as men, dying as they had lived while their master took his place among the Allfather's pantheon.

'I have them,' voxed Bulveye, sprinting hard to Jorin's right. The location marker appeared on Jorin's helm-display – fifty metres ahead, down a level, buried somewhere in the cluster of buildings before them. They were now far from the main assault zones, and in those areas much of the fortress was relatively intact.

'Life signals?' asked Jorin, heading down the last alleyway before the target, keeping his bolter held loose and ready. 'Hel, what's *wrong* with the comms?'

'Just one signal,' confirmed Bulveye. The huscarl's voice betrayed his tension. 'Faint, but present.'

They reached the end of the alley, and open space stretched out before them. A courtyard, unscathed by mortar damage, running ahead for another ten metres, after which a towering edifice closed off the far end. It had the look of a temple or a cathedral, replete with spires that rose like grasping fingers into the fire-streaked sky. Other buildings enclosed the left and right flanks of the square, their bombed-out windows empty and flickering.

In front of the cathedral a squad of Dulanian mech-troops waited, opening fire as soon as the Wolves came out into the open. There was no time for subterfuge or diversion – the pack hared straight at the enemy, firing on the run.

The courtyard soon filled with the whoosh and slam of bolt-shells, as well as the eerie crackle of interference guns discharging. A warrior of Bulveye's pack was hit full-on, upended and dragged back across the rockcrete, his armour crackling with released

energy. Others stumbled, struck on the leg or the arm and sent crashing to the ground in a skein of blood and torn-up ceramite. Scarabines went down too, their shields overwhelmed with massed bolter-hits. By the time they had powered up for a second volley, the Wolves were among them, lashing out with sword and axe, driving every blow with the desperation of time running out.

Jorin pounded a path through the reeling enemy, slashing throats and breaking cables. He barged a warrior aside, slamming him back against the warehouse wall, before punching hard, once, twice, a third time, driving his helm into the bone beneath. The Faash trooper collapsed, and then Jorin was moving again, firing at the great temple doors and blasting them back on their hinges. He raced inside, tearing down the stairwell beyond, taking the steps three at a time, hitting the ground level, swinging around the corner, charging out into the inner chamber beyond.

The interior was pitch-black, its high windows covered and its lumens doused. For a moment even Jorin's eyesight struggled to compensate, and for a half-second it felt as if he had been hurled into the void.

Then flood-lumens suddenly blazed into life, illuminating an arched nave, covered in the dragon emblems of the Tyrant, its walls as crimson as the outer scarps of the fortress. Twenty metres down the nave stood a proscenium stretching the width of the hall. Above the stepped stage was a scaffold that extended up towards the keystone of the arch, from which hung a huge cage, iron-barred and swaying. Within the cage, slavering and bestial, was the remains of a warrior. He was just as Haraal had been, clawing at the bars, his face distorted with drool and blood and matted fur, his armour cast aside as his body had swollen and hunched. His exposed flesh showed signs of torment, and great open welts ran the length of his naked limbs.

Bulveye joined Jorin in the chamber, followed by the rest of the

packs, and they spread out across the temple's floor, transfixed by the spectacle above. Just as on the hunter-killer's bridge, they trained bolters on the captive, though the order to fire did not come. The mutated warrior in the cage showed no recognition of its old brothers, but launched itself at the metal, yowling and tearing at its bonds and making the cage swing crazily.

Jorin tightened his finger on his bolter's trigger, feeling a familiar sickness kindle deep in his stomach. All he had to do was give the word, though it froze on his lips, locked in a stasis of repulsion.

Then his comm-bead, which had been seething with static since the assault began, suddenly cleared. Shutters high up in the chamber walls slid back, revealing image generators all trained on the stage. Generators whirred into life, and the dragon emblems over the scaffold suddenly blazed with a lurid back-light.

'*Forces of the Faash!*' came a vox-recording, played at deafening volume from vox-augmitters all across the proscenium arch. '*Know now the nature of those who lay siege to Dulan! See the true face of your enemy, and pierce his lies! Beware the alien, the mutant, the heretic!*'

Images from the vid-capture suddenly burst into Jorin's helm-feed, shoving aside the tactical overlay and filling the viewfinder with close-up images of the warrior's bestial face. He blink-clicked to remove it, but it slid back in place, overlapping and jumbled, crammed with the leering, snarling faces of the beast above.

He opened fire, aiming at the generators and smashing them. His pack did likewise, sending bolt-shells into the vaults and bringing the devices down in a hail of bouncing sparks.

The vox-recording cut out, the images flickered away.

'What was that?' asked Bulveye, sounding stunned.

Before any answer could come, the galleries above them on either side filled with troopers, dozens of them, opening fire on them from the high vantages and sending las-beams drilling into the

cathedral floor. More began to rappel down from the heights, and other spilled out of doorways behind the stage.

Jorin withdrew steadily, firing up at the newcomers as his packs' bolters sent responding volleys into the enemy.

'No idea,' he said grimly, picking his targets. 'But we're not leaving. Not without taking *that* with us.'

Orfeo snapped his head up, rendered speechless for a moment. The visual feed cleared, but what he had just seen was hard to forget.

'I have been in error, lord,' he said, warily. 'The interference over the fortress was not an accident, it was–'

'Say no more,' snapped the Lion. 'Erase those records. Find out how that reached our grid, then fix it.'

Orfeo bowed hurriedly and got to work. Alajos waited for his primarch to respond to the brief vid-burst. Even after decades in the Great Crusade, having witnessed horrors and wonders to last a dozen lifetimes, little compared to what he had just seen.

'Do we have the Wolves' positions on the augurs?' the Lion asked.

'We do,' said Alajos.

'And they are still static?'

'They have not yet advanced.'

'And Moriaen?'

'No change.'

The Lion nodded, weighing up the options. All across the chamber, his guards waited, poised for the command. They had all seen the images of the beast – just a single moment, a flash of a nightmare, swiftly extinguished though impossible to erase.

'I gave him time,' said the Lion eventually, almost reluctantly, but still with that edge of anticipation. 'Something is wrong. Something has always been wrong with them.' He turned to Alajos.

‘It has to be ended.’

‘By your will,’ said Alajos, sending the order to his assembled paladin squad via the closed comm-link.

The two of them left the chamber, heading out and up the spiral stairway to the roof of the hall, where the Legion thralls had been busy. As they emerged into the open, Stormbirds circled above them, holding position amid the underlit storm-clouds. The wind whipped and eddied, driven by the furious heat of the inferno unleashed below, and the air tasted of burned embers. Fifty of the Legion’s paladins were waiting for them, and they raised their blades in salute as their primarch emerged.

The exposed vantage was the highest point in the captured citadel, commanding a view of the entire battle-zone. The Crimson Fortress rose up across the eastern horizon, vast and smoke-shrouded, while plumes of smoke roiled up from combat-sites across the entirety of the plains beyond.

Teleportation vanes had already been erected around the perimeter of the platform, each one crackling with warp energies and chained to heavy power units. The air itself spat with static, reacting to the approaching tear in the veil and churning like milk in a thrown pail.

‘Loci established,’ said the paladin commander, Inardin, and the Lion moved to the centre of the platform. The other knights, Alajos included, took their places around him, and the vanes sent tendrils of aether-force licking and snarling.

The Lion hesitated then, just for a moment. He looked out eastwards, to where the fortress burned under a lowering night sky. It seemed to him like some immense funeral pyre, rendering itself down to ashes, already condemned to destruction whatever else transpired on Dulan. Somewhere deep inside that enormous heap of iron and rockcrete his brother still fought, with the enemy or with himself. The place had a foul aspect now, more akin to a tomb than

a fortress.

Alajos waited. The paladins waited. The wind screamed around them, hot as a furnace, bearing the screams of the dying on ashen wings.

Then the Lion stirred himself, planted his feet and grasped the hilt of his sword in readiness.

'Enact,' he commanded, and the vanes roared into blinding light.

Jorin and Bulveye raced for the stage, leaping up the steps and opening fire across the empty expanse of the cathedral interior. Their warriors came with them, forming a shield wall across the edge of the dais and laying down bolter-shells.

The air rang, and the pillars and the walls and the floor blew into spinning shard-fragments. Faash Scarabines advanced into the tempest, their weapon-arms blazing, only to be cut down amid hails of shells. Wolves were thrown down in their turn, caught in the maelstrom as they attempted to reload or push forwards.

Jorin loosed bolt after bolt. The caged beast howled in its captivity, driven into a fever of insanity by the chaos raging around it. More Scarabines poured into the chamber, kicking the far doors aside. Ammo-counters began to click to empty, and soon bolters were being cast aside in favour of close-combat weapons.

'We cannot hold them forever,' said Bulveye, pumping round after round into the approaching enemy hordes.

'Maybe not,' said Jorin, his jaw clenched. The counter on his bolter was rattling down rapidly – soon it would be gone. 'Not alone.'

He swung his bolter upwards, pointing the muzzle at the chains that held the beast captive, and fired. The coupling blew apart, sending the cage crashing to the ground in front of them. The structure smashed apart, setting the creature free, and it bounded

hungrily on all fours towards the approaching Faash.

It hit them like a storm front, tearing straight into their advancing ranks and laying into them with bestial abandon. It howled as it fought, its movements faster than even its battle-brothers': jerky, frenzied, primordial. Interference bolts smacked into it and made no difference – it ploughed on, tearing them apart, ripping limb from socket, biting into throats and shaking the flesh loose. Against that horror, the enemy wavered, then panicked, retreating back down the length of the nave in disarray.

Jorin unlocked his axe and charged down to join the beast, and the Wolves with him broke out from the stage, each one mimicking the howls of the creature in their midst. The space became crammed with bodies, locked together in a bloody grapple, and even the beast could only kill so many before its many wounds would eventually bring it down. Jorin fought on grimly, caught between his battle-rage and the horror of what he had let loose, not thinking of anything else but the rhythm of his axe-strikes, one after the other, hewn as if they could somehow absolve him for what had been created within his company.

But then, just as the creature's roars began to ebb and the tide of battle threatened to turn again, huge explosions boomed from beyond the far wall, accompanied by the unmistakeable growl of gunship engines. The Faash turned, realising the danger too late, only to see the double doors blasted into scrap. Two true-wolves bounded through the gap, leaping up at the throats of the mech-troops and bearing them down. Warriors of the Rout followed them in, launching a hammering tornado of bolt-rounds.

Then, more terrible than any other, the Wolf King strode into the chamber, his chainsword growling, his countenance as dark as thunderheads.

And then the slaying truly started.

The world disappeared in a rush and snap of aether-matter, followed by a surge of extreme cold, the sensation of weightlessness and the half-heard howls of the abyss below.

Then the nausea ended, the world of the senses clamped back down around them, and they were out. The paladins energised their blades, searching for targets, tensed for the inevitable hail of return fire.

None came. The Lion, positioned in the heart of his warriors, kept his blade sheathed.

The coordinates were correct. Orfeo had sent them directly into the heart of the Tyrant's throne room, right at the topmost pinnacle of the Crimson Fortress. It was suitably vast – a many-aisled complex of rooms and anterooms and alcoves, softly lit, uncomfortably hot. Water trickled from the gaping mouths of gargoyle-fountains. Tall, arched gothic windows glowed hot from the burning outside, but the glass remained intact.

The paladins moved aside, scanning the rooms beyond the main chamber, their movements watchful. Alajos and the Lion walked forwards, to the centre of the complex. A dome opened up above them, thirty metres high and adorned with a mosaic image of the curled dragon of Dulan. Under the dome was a dais, and upon the dais was a throne of darkest jet. A lone figure sat on the throne: a man, clad in faded crimson robes. He was pale and old, his skin as translucent as parchment.

The light was low, emanating softly from candles, just as it did in the halls of Caliban. Shadows underfoot slid uncertainly, wavering between soft pools of butter-yellow illumination. A fragrance like sacrificial oils hung in the air, just on the edge of detection.

The enthroned figure made no move. He looked down at the approaching knights with dark, ringed eyes. At close range, it was clear that he was more than old – he was ancient, and hideous, preserved like a specimen in aspic. His humanity – for he was

certainly human – looked as if it had been stretched beyond breaking point, turning him into some monstrous parody of immortality.

'Then you are the first, Lord of Caliban,' the Tyrant of Dulan said, his voice as pale and soft as reeds. 'You need not hesitate. There is nothing in this room that could hurt you. Not yet, anyway.'

The Lion drew up to the throne, his boots clinking on the dais steps. The paladins fell back. In the refracted light, their armour glinted, and the edges of it were softened. The candles flickered in eddies of hot air, gusted from far below by the pyres of a burning world.

The Lion did not speak for some time. His helm-face – winged, mirrored with darkness – regarded the emaciated form ahead of him. As ever, he was calculating. The last threads of the aether-passage slithered into the stone at his feet, extinguishing like corpse-dust.

'I bring judgement to this world,' said the Lion, his voice echoing in the emptiness. 'It is claimed for the Imperium, for the Master of Mankind.'

The Tyrant looked hollow, exhausted. 'I see and I hear what you have done to this place. Destruction placed upon destruction. Such is the peace your Emperor brings to the galaxy. Such was the offer you placed on the table, and expected me to take, and to be thankful for it.'

The Lion slowly crossed his arms. Just then, he looked more solid than anything else in the chamber – where every other line was soft, every hue blurred, his outline was as firm and unyielding as his sword's honed edge.

'You did not need to be thankful,' said the Lion. 'You merely needed to recognise the direction of history. You might have had a role to play, had you understood the new order of things.'

'A role. For me.' The Tyrant gazed emptily at the massive

primarch, his dark eyes moistened by age. His hands trembled a fraction as they clutched the arms of the throne, though from infirmity, not fear. 'No, not now. Too wasted, guiding this realm from barbarism and into a kind of light. It has drained me, you see this? A hundred of my surgeons labour daily to keep me alive, for without me, only emptiness awaits. We learned this, in ages of horror – which we overcame, and we banished – only for you to come.'

The Tyrant eased gingerly back in his throne, and as his body moved it seemed as if his bones must break, his skin slough off, his scrawny neck snap.

'Now tell me, agent of the Emperor,' he said, 'for I truly wish to know – what would you have done, if Dulanian ships had come to Caliban and made such demands as you have made?'

The Lion remained impassive. His sword remained sheathed. 'I have heard that question posed from rulers of a dozen worlds. And to them all, I give the same answer – it matters not. You did not come to us, we came to you. Fate has given you the only answer you will ever receive.'

'Ah, then.' The Tyrant smiled wanly. 'Yours is the *mightier* empire, and so that is all that can be said.'

'It is not might that separates us. I have witnessed the Emperor's vision. Only in Unity are we strong. Only through His guidance can the old terrors be banished for eternity. Should we fail, they will return, so I have no guilt in ending your obstruction. As I say, you were given the chance.'

'Yes, I had the chance to submit to the yoke of another,' said the Tyrant. 'Some chance. I know what you call me – "tyrant". You summon up the spectre of tyranny to justify your actions, and yet my people fight for me. You noticed that? They see you come to tear down all we have built, and they recognise the hand of the oppressor. So do not tell me that you come to bring enlightenment,

for that is an illusion. We endured the long aeons here when Terra was but a myth or childish dream. We looked out at what you name *terror,* and we learned to keep it beyond the walls. We had our kernel of knowledge from a deeper past. You have seen what we can do, and in certain ways it surpasses even your own capability, and that should not surprise you, for we would do *anything* to protect our home. And now you come again, like a nightmare that persists on the waking. So I am glad that we fought you, primarch. It will ease the passage of my soul, when all is done.'

'You need not die,' said the Lion. 'Give the order to your armies that remain. Your empire is taken, your capital world fallen. We control your power generation, and my brother's warriors are even now taking your fortress apart. Consider it a last scrap of fortune to find yourself debating with me, rather than him, for I do not think he would have extended you such indulgence.'

The Tyrant smiled again, nodding, his thin lips extending over yellowed teeth.

'Say the word,' the Lion went on. 'Lives can be saved. You will be taken from here and judged for your crimes, but your world will be received into the Imperium, its people preserved.'

The Tyrant lost his smile. 'No, I do not think you understand what is happening here,' he said. 'You see the passage of years, of decades and centuries, and think that this is somehow significant, and that Dulan matters, or that Terra matters. And yet an entire empire may be suffered to endure for a single test.'

The Lion made no move.

'Perhaps one day, far from now, you will encounter an enemy that you cannot best,' the Tyrant said. There was an edge of malice in his words now, the first trace of bitterness. 'Then you will know what we know now. You will peer into your soul as your walls come down around you, and you will gaze out across armies too vast to count, and you will be faced with the impossible test – what

to do? Run? Concede? Fight, though it will do nothing but spill more blood onto a galaxy that already swims in it?'

The Tyrant struggled to his feet then, swaying unsteadily over the throne and supporting himself with switch-thin arms.

'Only then will you understand, Lord of Caliban,' the Tyrant said, his old eyes flashing. 'Only then will you know yourself, and what matter you are made of. This is what we have discovered, in these last years of torment. I might even thank you, for giving us this. You have shown us what we are. That we are *better*.'

The Lion drew his sword, and as the steel slid from the scabbard, candlelight capered along its edge. He swung the heft of it expertly, silently, bringing it into guard with a duellist's liquid artistry.

'Yet it always comes to this, in the end,' the Lion said, his austere voice impassive. 'Do you yield?'

The Tyrant looked up, his sunken features barred by the *Lion Sword*'s shadow. Slowly, as if performing the movements of a ritual, he drew a dagger from his cloak.

'What do you think?' he asked.

Once the last of the screams had echoed away, Russ stood in the heart of the cathedral, his chainsword dripping lengths of blood, his breath coming in great heaves. The stone floor was piled with the corpses of the Faash, and the Wolves stood among them like butchers, their ceramite dripping thickly.

The press of the fighting had kept primarch and jarl apart, and only now, with the last of the enemy slain, did the way become clear between them. Jorin let his axe fall, its disruptor field shuddering out. The come-down from the intensity of his battle-rage was heavy, and a dull pain broke out from behind his temples.

Between the two of them, draped atop a tumbled heap of limbs and broken armour, lay the creature that had once been a Wolf of

Fenris. Like Haraal before him, the warrior had taken massive damage. A few plates of armour still hung in place, but most of it was gone, replaced with a thickly furred mass of muscle fibre. A stiff crust of blood, nearly as black as mjod, caked everything, most of it the creature's own. Las-burns, projectile wounds, knife-tears all overlapped across tormented flesh, though that was nothing compared to the wounds he had inflicted on the enemy. Heads had been ripped from shoulders, limbs torn free, torsos disembowelled. More corpses surrounded the beast than any other fighter. He had created heaps of the slain, mountains of them, such as a warrior of old Asaheim would once have dreamed of creating.

Russ stalked over to the creature and gazed down at it. He remained motionless for a long time, vapour escaping in gouts from his helm's vox-grille. His warriors shook down their blades, and dared say nothing. Jorin waited where he was, a few paces away.

Then the Wolf King reached for his helm and twisted it free. Only then could the look of deep anguish on his face be seen – a twisting of iron-hard features, a torture of their blunt lines. Russ knelt, lifted the head of his fallen son, narrowed his eyes, studying the changes that had been wrought. Then, slowly, he let the beast's mane slump back, its jaw fall open, its bloodshot eyes stare sightlessly up at the cathedral roof.

His gaze swept up towards Jorin.

'Why didn't you tell me?' he asked.

By then Freki and Geri had picked their way to their master's side. No other soul stirred.

'I…' Jorin started. 'I was waiting.'

'For what?'

'A cure. Understanding. Something to tell us–'

'That it wouldn't happen to us all.' Russ drew himself to his full height again. His charred pelts slid across his heavy armour, exposing the heart's-blood pattern of runes. The primarch looked

haggard. ‘You know there are no promises.’

He lumbered slowly towards Jorin, treading down on the limbs of the slain and snapping bones under his boots.

‘Look at it,’ Russ said, grimly, as he advanced. ‘What do you see?’

‘I see what we were,’ said Jorin.

‘And what we will be.’

‘Did you know?’

Russ halted, less than an arm’s breadth from his jarl.

‘I knew the risks. I knew what was in the Canis Helix. I know why it was made. I have seen the place where the draught was created, and the ancient bio-forges necessary to formulate it. Other Legions have their own poisons – this is ours. And, yes, I have seen those that do not return from the wilds. I have gone out there, sometimes, alone, and ended their agony. They looked no different to this one. But in the Legion… No, I did not know. I had hoped, perhaps, that it would remain at bay. Malcador warned me, but who of us ever listened to the Sigillite? We might have to start doing so now.’

Jorin bowed his head. ‘Lord, I am–’

‘Do *not* apologise to me!’ roared Russ, rage kindling suddenly. ‘You knew what had to be done. You have let this thing grow within your company, and you have thought to keep secrets from your liege lord, judging yourself wiser. Those images were beamed out across this entire fortress. We all saw it. The enemy saw it. My brother will have seen it. If you were trying to keep it hidden, you could not have failed more completely.’

Jorin felt the blood in his cheeks spike. ‘I thought…’ he began, but the words failed him.

‘You thought it was Dekk-Tra, the Thirteenth, alone,’ said Russ, bitterly. ‘You thought you had the fault within you, and none other suffered. You were wrong. It will be worse for you, perhaps, but

we all carry it. It is what we hear in the chill of the night, when the sounds of war are banished and all we have left is ourselves. Best to keep fighting, eh? Never have to hear it, then.'

Russ drew closer to his jarl, reaching out for him with both hands, seizing him by the shoulders and dragging him closer.

'And I did not want to think it,' he breathed, so softly that only the two of them heard the words. 'You, above all, *you*. When I saw you pass the test, when the Terrans told me it was impossible, my hearts leapt, for I knew that I could trust my shield-bearer in all things. None, I told myself, none of Terra or Fenris, would match you. All others would fail me, in the end, but not you, for we were both of the same hall, and Thengir was our sire, and we had trod the ice together before there was anything else.'

Jorin looked up into Russ' grief, held fast, his lean face as pale as bleached bone.

'What must I do?' he asked.

If he had been told to fall on his axe, he would have done it.

Russ let him go. The primarch pulled his furs about him, hawked up a gobbet of spittle, let it fly, then shook his head wearily. 'No more commands. It's out, we know the truth of ourselves. There's no cure for this – none that I'd countenance anyway. The wolf makes us strong. We can't complain when it bites us.'

He looked back over at the stricken once-warrior.

'Burn the dead,' he said. 'We still have fighting ahead of us.'

He was about to turn away, when Helmschrot's voice suddenly crackled over the comm.

'*Lord, we have teleportations into the fortress summit*,' Ogvai reported from the battlefront, his voice betraying his outrage. '*The Angels are attacking*.'

Russ' head snapped up. The emptiness in his eyes switched into fury.

'He gave his word,' the primarch said, disbelievingly. 'You must

be wrong.'

'*We're fighting to reach him now. Believe me, there is no mistake – he is ahead of us.*'

Russ reached for his helm. 'He strikes at me *now?*' he cried, his strength flooding back. 'Hel's eyes, he has chosen the wrong moment to goad me.'

Then he was moving, sweeping back down the length of the cathedral, gathering momentum with every stride, his true-wolves at his heels. Blackblood fell in alongside him, followed by the rest of the Einherjar. The thrumming sound of Stormbirds descending outside the cathedral swelled, making the ground shiver beneath their feet.

Jorin hesitated, unsure whether he was summoned or not.

'Lord, I–' he began

Russ turned his head. 'No,' he said. 'Take the body back to the fleet, then burn this place to the earth. I have had enough of this world – if you truly thirst for atonement, make the rest of them scream.'

Then the Wolf King was gone, leaving the cathedral to the corpses. Jorin turned to Bulveye. They stared at one another for a moment. At their feet, the blood mingled and pooled.

Then the Wolf Lord stooped to retrieve his axe.

'You heard him,' he said. 'We're not done yet.'

One sword-stroke was all it took – whisper-quiet, surgical in precision. The Tyrant's severed head hit the ground with a wet thump, then rolled along the length of the throne-room, leaving a thin trail of oily blood in its wake. His dagger clattered from loosening fingers, his robes folding in on themselves. The Tyrant's body seemed to shrivel in death, coiling back on itself, as hard and fragile as a bird's pinions.

The Lion prodded the corpse with his boot, as if testing to see if any life remained. Alajos moved silently to his master's shoulder, ready for the next order. The candles still burned beneath the mosaics, though the flames were struggling now, the tapers running low.

'Was it necessary to end him, lord?' Alajos asked.

The Lion stirred from his thoughts. 'As long as he remained alive, there would be danger.'

'Surely. And yet–'

'We have added to the tally of worlds. We end one empire, we bring them another. Do not ask for more.'

Alajos nodded. 'As you will it,' he said, bowing. 'But I will not be sorry to leave this world. The dust of it sticks in my throat, and I am glad that our battles here are over.'

Just as the words left his mouth, the heavy peal of Stormbird engines became audible, first from a distance, then coming closer and closer until it felt like the gunships were right on top of them and the walls would be shivered to their foundations.

The Lion picked up the Tyrant's skull by its thin hair, then retreated to the throne dais.

'No, Chapter Master,' he said, wearily. 'I do not think they are.'

The doors at the far end of the chamber slammed open, booming through the linked rooms and gusting out the candle-flames. Russ emerged, brooding with incipient menace. His wolves were with him, his warriors were with him, and they spilled into the Tyrant's sanctum like beasts of the dark wood, stinking, their hackles up and radiating distilled aggression. All were armed and armoured, their battleplate streaked with burn-marks and war-spoil, their weapons already crackling with energy. The primarch of the VI Legion carried his unsheathed chainsword, near the length of a mortal man and marked with runes of destruction. As he stalked towards the throne, his totems – skulls and bound teeth and rune-tiles – clanked

and bounced from rain-grey armour.

'My brother,' Russ growled icily, his voice purring with naked threat. 'Tell me, do the oaths of Caliban mean nothing to you at all? Or do you think it safe to jest with the Wolves of Fenris, for whom the word of promise is held faster than the clutch of death?'

Inardin's paladins instantly fell into a defensive cordon around their lord, but the Lion gestured calmly for them to fall back. He waited for his brother to approach, the *Lion Sword* in one hand, the evidence of his kill in the other. Twists of acrid smoke rose from the charred stubs of candles.

'You come too late, Leman,' said the Lion, his voice as proud and clear as always. 'We could not wait forever.'

Russ was now halfway down the long aisle, his wolves padding at his side. His entourage was more than seventy strong, all bearing signs of long combat. Some were helmless, exposing tattooed, pierced faces; others were masked by bloodstained vox-grilles. The warriors clanged their blades against shields as they stalked, swaying belligerently, a tide of raw disorder. The fifty Dark Angels ranged against them stood silent in disciplined ranks, blades held at guard.

'You *swore it!*' roared Russ, his chainsword swinging about him in a heavy, sinister rhythm. 'You came between the Wolf and his prey.'

The Lion laughed sourly. 'And it was simple to do. No wonder you prefer to fight alone.'

Russ closed in on his brother, his stride lengthening now, and the Lion remained where he was, standing exposed before the empty throne. The chainsword growled and whirred in the dark, a smear of killing teeth circling a chassis marked with death-runes.

Then the Wolf King halted, just as he had done before his brother on the decks of the *Invincible Reason*. He glanced at the head of his enemy, the one he had sworn to take, then looked up at the Lion.

The Lion was still and erect, his cloak dropping like water from his armoured shoulders, his stance proud. Russ was stockier, bulkier, his stance tensed for an explosion of movement. The pattern of blood and filth across his helm made him look murderous, a wight of the outer dark, a race-memory of predatory excess.

'You should stand down now, brother,' said the Lion, quietly. 'These theatrics serve no purpose.'

Russ laughed, a snagging, throaty rattle. 'Oh, but they *do*,' he snarled darkly. 'They are what make us. We are the beasts of your old fears, my noble lord. We are the frenzy that haunts your dreams. We are the destroyers and the creators, the purest, the wildest, and you envy it, for you can never match it.'

There was something febrile in the air now, a kind of mania that hummed between them, flickering like the play of unnatural light.

'Brother, I could never envy you,' said the Lion. 'I have seen too much of the company you keep.'

Russ erupted into a howl of fury, swept up to the Lion with a sudden surge of speed and landed a huge, clenched fist into the heart of his brother's breastplate.

The Lion reeled backwards, sent slamming into the throne, and the Tyrant's severed head flew from his grasp. Russ went after him, ready to strike again, but the Lion pushed back to his feet, his blade whipping into position.

'So this is what you came for,' sighed the Lion of Caliban. 'How disappointing, yet how predictable.'

By then Russ' warriors had formed up around their master. Neither side attacked the other, but all stood ready.

'You have always called me savage,' spat Russ, leaving his chainsword out of guard, and keeping his free fist poised. 'Now you will discover what it truly means.'

They faced one another, circling warily. Russ' anger was

palpable, spilling out of him like heat from a fire, his breath coming in throaty hisses. The Lion was colder, more remote, but now equally furious, his dignity dented in front of his warriors. This was not the formal duelling he excelled at – this was a brawl, kicked off by a barbarian, a hothead no better than the dogs he kept.

'You do not have to play to this reputation, brother,' the Lion said. 'You can drop the pretence any time you choose.'

'My warriors fight on below,' spat Russ. 'If you had aided them, I would have called you friend for it.'

'Then go to them yourself,' said the Lion. 'Do not blame me for doing what you would not.'

Russ swept back into contact, this time swinging his chainsword across at his brother. The Lion met the strike two-handed, driving the blow back with his longsword in a blaze of sparks. For a moment they tried their strength, pressing the two blades hard, and metal screamed against metal. *Krakenmaw*'s churning teeth ground against the immaculate edge of the *Lion Sword*, neither finding the advantage.

At the sight of true fighting breaking out, Blackblood's warriors roared encouragement, slamming their blades, generating a wall of noise in support of their liege. The Dark Angels initially made no move, but finally responded, seeing what was unfurling. Let by Inardin, soon they were calling out in turn, vying with the Wolves to shout the louder, cheering for their liege as if on the tourney-field of old Caliban.

'You have ever held yourself above the rest of us,' spat Russ, driving more power into his locked arms. 'Where does it come from? Were you damaged as a child?'

The Lion pushed back, giving no ground. 'I never saw the point of you, that is true. No one could explain it to me, either.'

Then he broke away, falling back. Russ went after him, and they traded heavy swings, their blades clanging together with bone-

breaking force. If the primarchs heard the roars of their retinues, they did not show it. Huge blows landed, propelled with utter commitment, fast and accurate, fuelled by the mutual antipathy that had always been there, gestating beneath the veneer of the Great Crusade and now erupting into open combat.

'No, our purpose is evident,' said Russ, pressing furiously, driving his brother beyond the throne and back down the long hall beyond. 'You see it before you now, and you long to be its equal.'

'All I see is delusion, brother. So much energy, so poorly directed.'

Russ was the stronger of the two by a fraction, powering *Krakenmaw* with the greater heft and momentum, but the Lion had the superior dexterity, angling his parries and thrust to catch Russ off balance. They hacked and drew at one another, circling, feinting, slicing through cloak and pelt, smashing the trophies from their armour. The impact of every strike echoed out through the throne room, fast and hard, gaining in speed and commitment.

The cries of encouragement reached a crescendo, resounding down the long throne-room, swelling into every alcove. All legionaries present were seasoned fighters, used to the continual test of the practice cage and duelling-pit, and yet none had ever witnessed their masters stretched to the fullest. Russ and the Lion had been created by the Emperor, schooled in every stratagem known to the Imperium, made as strong and as fast and as guileful as physics and biology would allow. When they moved to strike, it was godlike – blurred by speed, locked into perfect precision, weighted to cause apocalyptic levels of damage.

Finally, they broke apart, both breathing heavily, both carrying deep rents on their armour. Russ started to laugh, though it was a dark, acid sound.

'Too much for you yet, my noble lord?' he taunted. 'You can count the worlds you conquer, but you've never fought like this.'

‘No, it was never a game to me.’

‘Nor I.’

The Lion snorted. ‘You treat *all* as a game. That is why they sent for me – Malcador cannot trust you. No one can trust you. Your Legion is a rabble that would brawl among themselves if you were not there to smack their heads together.’

‘If only they were more like yours,’ said Russ, mockingly.

‘Yes,’ replied the Lion, exasperated. ‘*Yes*. Is that so hard to imagine?’

Russ loosened his arms, letting *Krakenmaw* swing lazily before him. ‘I know why you do this. I know why you conquer, world after world, driving your sons after every campaign Malcador finds for you. But our father won’t do it, brother. He won’t choose a favourite. And if He did, it wouldn’t be you – it would be Sanguinius, or Rogal, or Horus. So you’re wasting yourself, trying to be noticed. It doesn’t work like that.’

The Lion let slip a scornful laugh. ‘Not all of us are so without friends in the Palace, Leman, and you have no idea who our father favours.’

‘Maybe so,’ said Russ, advancing again, his chainsword revving. ‘But He’s not here now, is He? Just you, me, and the kraken’s teeth.’

‘An ugly blade,’ said the Lion, glancing at it warily. ‘Much like its master.’

Russ piled in again, sweeping the chainblade low and aiming for his adversary’s legs, but the *Lion Sword* slammed down to block, propelled two-handed and held fast. Russ heaved upwards, aiming to overbalance the Lion, and they both staggered further down the hall, pursued by their cheering entourages.

Then the Lion struck, hauling his blade around crossways, only to drive it up at the last minute. Russ’ counter-strike came in too high, and *Krakenmaw* was wrenched, spitting, from his grasp. He

reached out to pull it back, but the Lion had already sent it clattering away, and it tumbled, end over end, forcing the paladins to leap clear.

Perhaps the Lion thought that this might have been an end to it, for he never followed up with the strike that would surely have driven deep into Russ' exposed chest, but the Wolf King had other ideas. Snarling with rage, Russ barged headlong into his brother, turning his entire body into a weapon, smashing the Lion back.

The two of them careened into the nearest pillar – a column of pure stone a metre thick. The Lion thudded into it, sending cracks rushing out. Russ punched him again, then again, his fists furious and speed-blurred, breaking his brother's fine helm and denting the angel's wings at its temples. The Lion, reeling, swung his sword clumsily, but the blow was weak and did not bite. Russ grabbed him by the shoulders, and with a cry of rage and exertion, threw him bodily across the hall.

The Lion hit the ground hard, toppling onto his back and dragging along the stone flags. Russ turned to pursue him, still weaponless. *Krakenmaw* had been thrown a long way, and as he made to retrieve it, Alajos moved to bar his way.

For a moment the primarch hesitated, stunned by the defiance. Then he gave up on his chainsword and ripped an axe from the Dark Angel's grasp, before sending Alajos sprawling with a back-handed blow that might easily have ripped the Chapter Master's head off.

'This'll do,' he snarled, racing back to his recovering brother.

As the Lion leapt back up, the two of them collided again, axe versus sword, now two weapons of the First Legion set against one another. The blows came in quicker, more frenzied, tearing away at ravaged armour and biting into flesh for the first time. Blood as thick as engine oil flecked across the stone flags, marking their progress along the full length of the hall and out towards the

antechambers beyond. The watching legionaries could only follow, captivated by the sustained violence of it.

They fought. They fought with the conviction of brothers wronged, and of demigods roused to anger.

'There is no place for you, Leman,' cried the Lion breathlessly, working to counter a new flurry of blows. 'You will always be shunned, and you made this fate yourself. When this Crusade is over, you will have nothing but your home world, nothing but your empty mountain to brawl in. Is that what you wanted?'

'I asked for nothing,' said Russ. 'Nothing but what I am. We were all made for a reason, and we at least know what ours is.'

'Ha! Some purposes were flawed. *That* you know. Legions can be sanctioned, their lords held to account. Perhaps yours will be one of those. Do you think so, brother? If the day ever comes, I will not be astonished at it.'

'Speak not of things you don't understand, boy!' growled Russ. 'Gods, you are as ignorant as you are arrogant.'

The two primarchs bludgeoned their way through a set of heavy doors, fighting all the while, leaving their pursuing warriors behind, barely conscious of their surroundings. Beyond the doorway was the open air, an observation platform built right at the pinnacle of the fortress for surveying the Tyrant's realm. As they burst into the open, the skies above greeted them with a low grind of thunder. Tortured by the heavy munitions loosed across the landscape below, the very air had become electric, thick with incipient rain and overborne by flame-lit cloud-banks.

They pulled apart again, panting heavily now, their shoulders lower.

'I fear for you, my brother,' spat Russ. 'I see a time when your conquests are over, and then you will have to look at one another

and see what you have become. I can see behind your mask, even if none on Terra can. We carry our curse in the daylight, free for all to see. Your poison is hidden, but it will come to light, sooner or later.'

'We do not all carry curses,' said the Lion.

'We were all made the same way,' said Russ. 'How could we not?'

Far below them, the wide plains were streaked with lanes of fire, pocked by smears of soot-black smoke, testament to the volume of punishment meted out by the two combined Legions. The citadels to the west were crumbling, reduced level by level by the Dark Angels. The industrial sprawl to the north was rocked by an endless chain-reaction of detonations, immolating whole plateaus of manufactoria in a raging inferno of neon fulguration. Below them, swooping down over the precipitous edges of the platform, the Crimson Fortress itself was being purged with fire and fury, the Wolves visiting dire retribution for their earlier trials.

The wind shrieked around them, snagged by tendrils of flame. Lightning lanced down along the southern horizon, ushering in the deluge that nature seemed to have summoned to cool the furnace ignited across Dulan.

'We are the First of the Imperium,' snarled the Lion, whirling into action again, powering across the platform's width and slamming his blade into the axe's block. 'We have *nothing* to hide.'

So they fought again, on and on, neither relenting, neither holding back. The Lion's skin ran with mingled sweat and blood under his armour, his arms growing heavier with every sweep of his blade. Russ was suffering too, limping from a deep cut to his right leg, the engine of his fury guttering as even his superhuman body felt the pain of cumulative damage. The blows became wilder, more vicious, flying in with abandon. Their energy reserves bled away, but hyper-adrenaline kicked in, flooding their secondary

hearts, staining every muscle and wrenching just a little more power, a little more effort.

Russ swung a heavy punch, missing the Lion's helm by a finger's breadth and driving deep into the wall beyond. The masonry shattered, the block imploding under the pile-driver impact. The Lion went to seize his enemy, to swing him round into the wall. The two of them, locked close now, crashed into the rockcrete, sending whole sections sliding over the edge.

Thunder cracked again overhead, and the rain came at last, seething through the fervid atmosphere and bouncing from every surface. The two primarchs battled on, demolishing more of the parapet and hurling debris out over the drop. Heedless of the danger, they were now utterly consumed, fighting like creatures possessed, driven no longer by any half-remembered grievance but by the purity of the struggle, the need to prevail, the warrior instinct in its most complete and prideful form. They drove at one another blindly, grappling on the edge, their weapons locked together.

The Lion tried to pull back, tried to force his opponent down onto the parapet floor. He grappled with the blackened wolf-pelt, seizing it and ripping it clear from his brother's back. The rune-totems scattered, cut from their twine, and bounced over the stonework. Russ shrugged off the attempted hold, crouched down, spread his arms and pushed forwards, catching the Lion in the midriff and propelling them both out across the broken parapet's lip.

The two of them teetered on the edge for a heartbeat, still lashing out at one another. Sword and axe clashed again, steel grinding against steel – the Lion fighting to hold position, Russ fighting to break it. With a final shove of locked arms, their combined centre of gravity tipped over, and their footing gave out in a shower of broken stone.

They plummeted, hurtling down the flanks of the fortress as the rain lanced with them. The outer walls of the Tyrant's redoubt

sloped fractionally outwards as they dropped, and the primarchs slammed into it fifty metres down, gouging a long wound in the outer plating and driving deeper in. The *Lion Sword* was lost, then the axe, both thrown clear by the impact and sent sailing out into the abyss.

With a sickening smack, both primarchs landed on a protruding balcony set further down. The stonework exploded as their combined weight rammed into it, and they ploughed on through, only coming to a stop when they hit another rampart-level below.

Surrounded by a cataract of tumbling rubble, each primarch got shakily back to his feet, weaponless but still compelled by blind fury. They charged at one another, their gauntlets clenched, punching out in a flurry of fresh blows. The rain sleeted down around them, sending blood-thickened rivulets coursing over their dented battleplate.

They were still high up, having landed on one of the topmost parapets of the east-facing wall. Far below, the lower levels spread out, smouldering and broken, resounding to the muffled booms of mortar-fire and the rumble of mobile armour.

Russ swung, the blow wild with exhaustion, catching the Lion on the temple and driving the curve of his helm in. The Lion staggered, pulling back to evade the follow-up, before launching a bludgeoning strike of his own. They closed in again, tearing at one another, slipping in the rain and the filth that swilled around them. Every impact was still incredible, propelled by the servos in their power armour, by their genhanced muscles, by their mutual and implacable anger.

Russ finally gained purchase and struck out, sending a crack snaking down the length of the Lion's already damaged helm. That seemed to trigger some fresh surge of rage in the Lord of Angels, and he hurled Russ aside, flinging him across the parapet's length. Russ snarled and powered back close, swatting away the Lion's

enervated punch and reaching out to smash his fist into the fissure he had opened.

He missed by a fist's width, and overbalanced, crashing into the floor and rolling over onto his back. As he did so, the sky above them erupted into thunderous light, the clouds bursting from within as lightning leapt down from the heavens. The Lion reeled away, panting hard, as bedraggled under the deluge as a Fenrisian dragonrat.

For a moment, all Russ saw was the opportunity. That last impact had nearly taken his brother's helm clean off – he could leap to his feet, shove him back to the parapet's edge, press the advantage and beat him down to his knees.

Every part of his body was hot with agony. Bones had been fractured, many of them. His armour was ruined, his blade lost. The Lion looked no better – his cloak hung about him in greasy tatters, and his shoulders were slumped.

Russ heard the laughter begin as if from far away, and took a while to realise it was he himself that was making it. His chest started to shake, and the mirth rose up in his gorge, burgeoning fast as the absurdity of the situation became truly apparent. They had commenced the duel as warrior-kings, superb and terrible, and had ended it as gutter brawlers, their finery smashed and their fury exhausted.

'Why do you laugh?' slurred the Lion, staggering towards him, his fists still balled.

Russ struggled to right himself, wincing through his laughter as the pain speared across his ribs. 'Hel's teeth, brother,' he spat, blood speckling his vox-grille. 'What are we *doing* here?'

The Lion swayed, standing over him, drowned in the heavy rain. Lightning crackled down the fortress' long sides, stained red by the fires.

'You yield?' asked the Lion.

‘I… do I what?’

‘Do. You. Yield?’

By then it was impossible to stop. The mirth became a torrent, as mighty as the cascades that now poured down from the fortress’ flanks. He tried to speak, to blurt out something that would end the whole ludicrous episode, but nothing came.

The Lion thought that this was still some kind of honour-duel. They had pummelled one another to the edge of consciousness, demolished half of the Tyrant’s palace in their fury, and still the Lord of Angels was demanding satisfaction.

It was madness.

Russ roared his laughter out, throwing his head back against the streaming walls. He forgot it all – the hunt, the Crusade, the sickness in his Legion’s soul, the politics of the fraternity of primarchs, the destiny of the species, and rocked in uncontrollable, puerile glee.

So he never saw the blow that finally ended it all.

He never tensed for it, never put up a warding arm, and never even watched for the Lion limping across to him, pulling his bloodied fist back and launching the punch that would crack open his skull and knock him as cold as the tombs of Caliban.

V

Before he woke again, Leman Russ dreamed deep.

At first, those dreams were of Dulan. He remembered the long hunt to find that world, the gathering of his warriors in the void, and then the opening of the brief, terrible battle over the crimson plains. He remembered the face of the beast, the first that he had seen in the Legion's armour, and how that had haunted him, and maddened him, and made him ripe for the provocation to come. And then he remembered the fight, and losing *Krakenmaw*, and breaking his brother's helm.

These things were in the past now, many long years ago, though the memory remained as solid and present as his heartbeats. Time's passage had made the events seem almost crazed, hyper-real, stretched across a surreal dreamscape that felt more like a skjald's embellished saga than the intact past.

Perhaps it had not happened like that. Perhaps the Lion had taken his Stormbirds to the Tyrant's fortress, and he himself had teleported in. Perhaps it had not been Ogvai there, but Gunn, or someone else.

Had Bjorn been there too? It was a long time ago, so doubtful, but Bjorn seemed to always have been there, right from the start, just waiting for his time to come to maturity.

The feud with the Lion had been ludicrous, pointless, an avoidable collision of egos. His fury at the Tyrant was forgotten now, washed away by the thousands he had killed since, so many and so fast that the drive of vengeance had diluted and the art of murder lost its savour.

Perhaps Dulan had been a test, after all. A test of the Lion,

maybe. Or him. Or both of them. How far could the primarchs be goaded? Would they fight one another? How far would their fury take them? Which was the stronger?

But those questions had been given different answers now. He had found more terrible enemies to fight, but they were not the remnants of the old human scattering, but closer to the heart of the Allfather's domain, the brightest stars within His ordained firmament, the trusted souls, the ones charged with keeping the flame alive in the darkness.

More dream-images came to him, memories and saga-fragments, tumbling and jumbled, one after the other. First Hawser had come, and he had known right from the start that the mortal's wyrd would be strange. Then came the events of Nikaea, and the gradual slide towards catastrophe had begun. Russ dreamed of the burning pyramids that he had cast into ruin, and the anguish of another brother he had fought, and then the howling tempest of the immaterium claiming its own.

After that had come the blood-shoals of Alaxxes, and Gunn's thread cut, and then Yarant, and then so many dead that their ghosts still crowded both his waking and his sleeping.

At the end, the horror had swamped them, overtaking them until all that remained was desperation. Even a primarch could despair, when all was taken from him. He had seen the ruins of Terra, after the siege and its lifting, too late to do anything but weep. He had walked through the ashes of the Palace, his boots sinking deep into the flaked remnants of the dead.

He had known then, with the surety of the foresighted, that the guilt would never leave him. In life so much had been boasted, so much done, but in the final test he had not been there in time. Some wounds would heal, some would not.

In that time, in that place, few had dared approach him. Those who had survived Horus' world-ending assault wandered across the

battlements in a kind of stupor. Fighting still raged across the fallen carcass of the hearthworld, and would do for months, but he could not stir himself to join it, for the greater contest had ended.

He had never seen Dorn return bearing the Allfather's body. He had never seen them carry Sanguinius away. By the time he had made it to Terra, the damage was done, the halls were sealed, the last words of the Master of Mankind heard and acted upon. Now He was gone, locked within a mountain of His own devising, and even His sons could not reach Him again.

Who could look on that prison of pain, that catacomb of half-life, and not despair? What soul, who had witnessed the greatest and the best of all creation, would not be destroyed by it?

When Russ had discovered the truth, he had fled – *fled,* for the first time in his life – into the Palace interior, running from the sight, raging at the devastation that pressed down on him. The darkness crowded in, choking him, dragging the last flickers of awareness into oblivion. He was exhausted, burned out by Yarant and then the furious, desperate race to reach the hearthworld in time, then the horror of his discovery.

And so he fell, deep in the Palace that he had failed to guard, and slept again, deep and cold.

But before he woke again, Leman Russ dreamed deep.

He dreamed he was back on Fenris, a lifetime ago. The snows were new-fallen, glittering under a cold, bright sun. The Fang, yet to be delved, rose up into the southern horizon, its shoulders streaked.

He walked across fields of white, his leather boots sinking into the snow, his breath hanging in clouds around his face. A long journey lay ahead, trekking across the peaks, searching all corners of the realm he now must call his own for eternity.

The Wanderer walked beside him, cloaked in coarse grey, his face hidden. That face was always hidden – you couldn't look right

at it, or it would blind you, like the glare of the unbroken snow.

He didn't know how long they had been walking together – perhaps moments, perhaps a lifetime.

'Now is the time, Leman of the Russ,' the Wanderer said, in the voice that was both young and old, masculine and feminine, always soft, suffused with a patina of epochal sadness.

'What time?' he answered, coming to a halt.

The Wanderer turned, looking out into the highlands of Asaheim, where the peaks marched under a crystal sky, eternal and inviolate. 'For you to do what you were made for. Or let your grief end you. Your choice.'

Russ didn't understand. 'I was made to protect you,' he said.

'No. You were always wrong about that. You were made to protect what I created.'

The Wanderer started to walk again, climbing higher, leaning on a staff of ironpine and stooping as he went.

Russ watched him go. There were places he couldn't follow, not any more. The air chilled him to the bone, and so he turned, trudging back the way they had come. The Fang remained, the fortress that was yet to come, and which had been. Work lay ahead there, the great work of his life.

But then the dream faded. The chill of the ice world became the chill of the empty Palace, and the sunlight faded to the dull grey of Terra's winter.

Russ awoke. He blinked, shivered and pushed himself up from the floor.

He remained where he had fallen. He had collapsed into exhausted slumber under the great fresco commemorating the Compliance of Dulan, 870.M30. He himself was depicted in it, idealised as the immortal primarch, along with his brother, wrestling with the dragon and casting it down. The statue was intact, though covered in a thick layer of dust, just as everything in

the ruined Palace was. The hall was dark, as cold as the Fenris of his dreams, and silent.

He was not alone. His brother stood over him, staring up at the images of them both. The Lord of Angels had always been pale, but now his skin had a cadaverous aspect, edged blue in the faint light of a dying world.

'You remember Dulan, then,' he said, and his voice was as bitter as gall.

'I remember it,' said Russ, clambering stiffly to his feet. He still felt groggy, half lost in the dream. During the race to Terra he had not slept. They had been far away when word of Horus' final assault reached them. The two of them, the old adversaries, had both been absent when the killing blows were struck. So there was a final irony to crown them all.

The Lion had his sword drawn, and its grey steel glinted in the cold. It was the same one that Russ had wrenched from his grasp in the Tyrant's throne-room, all those years ago. It was said that he had never let a weapon slip from his fingers since.

'I thought I knew wrath, on Dulan,' said the Lion, eyes locked on the image. 'But I knew not then what wrath was.'

Russ pushed his way past him, not wanting to do this. History would not remember *why* they had been delayed, only that they had been, and that would be enough.

'Come back, Leman,' the Lion said, turning to follow him.

Russ walked on, tasting the ash on his lips. 'What for, brother?' he asked. 'What more is there to say?'

The Lion pursued him, catching up at the end of the gallery where more statues of old triumphs languished in the dust. He reached out and grabbed Russ by the shoulder, spinning him round.

'It was never finished, that duel,' the Lion hissed, his grey eyes narrow with fury. 'We left it undone, year after year.'

'You left,' said Russ. He had no stomach for sparring. 'When I

woke up, you were gone.'

'If I had stayed,' said the Lion, his voice shaking with fervour, 'truly, I would have killed you. But now I feel no such restraint, for all is ended, and all is madness, and nothing remains but vengeance for old scores.'

Russ made no move to defend himself. He had torn his armour off a long time ago, and in his heavy robes was defenceless. The tip of the *Lion Sword* still hung over him, held aloft by the Lion.

'All is not ended,' Russ said, defiantly, looking his brother in the eye. 'Not yet, not unless we let it be so, but our fight is over. Leave it on Dulan.'

The Lion's face contorted in a fury, driven by his unspeakable grief. 'You never learned!' he cried. 'You should have been *faster!* It was your pride that kept you in the void!'

Still Russ made no move, though the Lion's eyes were wild and dangerous.

'And I am guilty, just as you are,' the Lion urged again, his grip on the sword tight. 'So fight me, and we will pass sentence on each other, the guilty slaying the guilty. I will not ask you again.'

It was then Russ knew that his brother could never turn aside. The Lion looked as if he was barely seeing the world around him. Perhaps he was back in the Tyrant's throne-room, incensed, his unimpeachable pride at stake.

So Russ made no move. He left his chest exposed, held static under the blade's shadow, undefended, and shook his head.

With a cry that was more pain than triumph, the Lion shoved his blade deep, carving through flesh, the steel shrieking as it bent against a primarch's bones.

Russ roared out, his back arching, and felt the blackness rear up to cover him. He collapsed, the sword still buried in his chest, hitting the ashen floor with an echoing crack.

His last vision was of the Lord of Angels standing over him, tall,

terrible, shrouded in the madness of regret.

Then even that passed. Once more, just as it had been on Dulan, awareness slipped away. He felt himself falling, falling further, until the uttermost depth was plumbed and he knew no more.

VI

After the tale was told, Russ smiled and sat back on his haunches. Haldor looked up at him from the stone floor, questions clustering in his mind, though he was not ready to voice them yet.

'He knew he wouldn't kill me,' Russ said, grimly amused. 'He told me that afterwards. He turned the blade aside, right at the last moment. It still took a week to heal. That damned sword.'

He chuckled mournfully. 'It needed to be done, though. It cured the bad blood between us. Drained it out. We could speak again, after that.'

Haldor could see the images in his mind's eye, far more vivid than when the skjalds told their tales. He could see the Palace in its downfall, and the surviving brothers stalking the shadows.

'You are in mourning, lord,' Haldor said at last. 'Who has died?'

'If you'd been listening, you would know.' Russ sighed, and pulled the furs about him. 'What is the count of years now? I forget. We have built much since that day on Terra. We are a Chapter now, for our old sins. I never wanted that, but I did it, for I have grown weary of fighting with my own brothers, and there has been much to rebuild and remake.'

The primarch did not look at Haldor. He slumped in the caverns of the Fang, racked by its eternal cold.

'I curse that I know not when the Lion truly died,' he murmured. 'The tidings reach me now, but I do not believe them. He was never at the council when Guilliman and Dorn argued over the shape of the Imperium. We were told he was fighting in the Scouring, and why should we not have trusted that? If he had been there, perhaps he would have resisted the change, for he was ever proud of his

Legion, as he had every right to be.' Russ shook his head, and the shaggy locks, once blond, now grey, fell about him. 'He returned to Caliban after the siege, and that was the last anyone heard of him. All is secrecy now, and we are kept from the truth by this endless war, year after year. They say he died fighting the Great Enemy. Maybe that is so. I cannot believe it, myself.' He grinned. 'I know how hard he was to bring down. He was an arrogant bastard, but he had reason for it. A knight indeed.'

So that was it. The primarch of the First was lost, and news had only now reached Fenris. Russ mourned for his brother, not for any warrior of his own hearth.

'And Bloodhowl?' Haldor asked.

The question seemed like impertinence, but Russ merely laughed. His shoulders quaked and some of the torpor seemed to lift.

'Jorin?' Russ asked, and his smiling fangs glinted in the dark. 'Ah, Jorin. And the rest of them that came after – the wolf-brothers, the Thirteenth. You won't hear their sagas when you come to the long table. That is another tale, for another time, and you are too young for any of it, whelp.'

He turned to look at Haldor, his expression shrewd, half masked by the deep shadow.

'The Lion never spoke of it,' Russ said. 'Never. He could have told the Imperium of our sickness and made it worse for me, but even in his anger he said nothing.' The primarch mused on it. 'He could keep a secret. He saw our imperfection, and he suffered it to remain, and that was the heart of his nobility. In the end, then, he truly was better than us. The archetype of Legions, the First of all. If I owe him anything, it was for that.'

Russ sat back against the rock wall.

'But he's gone, and so the Age of the Primarchs takes another stagger towards its ending. But I'm left, eh?' He grinned again.

‘Still clinging on, like a raven hanging over carrion. I won’t go yet. I will, one day, and I’ll know when the time comes, but for now I’ll linger here, and watch over you awhile longer, for you’re a band of savages and need a firm hand.’ He laughed again. ‘What do they call you?’

‘Haldor Twinfang.’

‘You have a deed name? Already?’

Haldor held up the length of twine about his neck, cradling the bound fangs. ‘I took it from the beast, while out in the wilds.’

Russ grunted appreciatively. ‘Good. Though you’ll need to swap it for the enemy’s bones when you can.’

‘I will,’ Haldor said, hotly. ‘The day is coming – we head for the void at dawn.’

‘Ah,’ said Russ, understanding. ‘Of course, you’re Aeska’s pack. The new blood.’

He shuffled to his feet, pulling the furs around him. Though still colossal, his movements had the tenor of an old man’s, weary of the cold and of the dark. Haldor sprang to his feet, hurrying to get out of the way.

‘So I know why you found your way here, then,’ Russ said, clapping his rough hand on Haldor’s shoulder. ‘Did they tell you what you are?’

Haldor knew all of this. He’d been told again and again, drummed into him from the very first days of training. The repetition had made the knowledge stale, and he had grown bored of hearing it.

‘The first warrior to never know the Legion,’ he replied, almost by rote. ‘The first warrior to only know the Chapter.’

Russ nodded. ‘Good. Then they’re teaching you something.’

He started to move down the tunnel, heading deeper into the mountain. Haldor hesitated, not sure if he should follow. ‘Lord, do you wish me to–’

‘No, stay,’ said Russ, halting for a moment. ‘Go back to the fire. Eat, enjoy yourself.’ He half turned. ‘But I’ll tell you what I told Jorin, though it did him no good. It must remain. The way of the old world. I don’t want it forgotten, washed away by these new wars. If you survive to see your pelt go grey, remember that. Everything we did has an echo.’

He turned to leave, then hesitated again, eyes narrowing.

‘That axe,’ he said. ‘You know its name yet?’

Dawn came, grey over the Hunter’s Pass. The forges were stoked in the deep halls, the hangars were opened and the great void shields withdrawn from the Valgard heights.

Thunderhawks came down from the orbital relay craft, accompanying the crew lifters. They scored the skies white with contrails as they circled the stages, hovering watchfully as the lifters were loaded with their cargo.

The Claws headed to their transport, all nine of them, each one carrying a sharp pain behind his temples and rings of red around his eyes. None had slept, for the night before had been carried on and on, with more tales and more boasts, then more meat and more to drink. Fighting had broken out between Grey Hunters under Aeska’s high table, and Brannak had waded in at the end, his voice echoing from the cavern’s roof in incandescence.

‘So where did you go?’ asked Eiryk, rubbing his hand through his shock of red hair.

The air in the open hangar was punishing, and a hard gale was already blowing from the east. The lifter waited for them, gouting with steam and frost from the orbital passage, its doors standing open. Servitors were clustered around it, attaching refuelling cables, hauling away supply crates and dragging fresh units to the storage holds.

Haldor didn't feel like talking about it. Either he would say nothing, or he would say too much, and in any case the events felt as much like a dream as anything else. The mjod still coursed in his bloodstream, making him feel nauseous.

'Just needed some air,' he said, tramping up the long ramp and looking for his place in the pack's order.

Once installed, the thrusters boomed, and they were aloft, powering smoothly out of the hangar's portal and up into Fenris' atmosphere. For the first time, Haldor saw the Fang from above. He saw the mountains fall away, diminishing into a jumble of broken white ridges. The expanse of it was immense – the whole of Asaheim, dropping away from him until the jagged coasts came into view, gnawed at by the world's ocean. Somewhere out on that ever-changing expanse was his old tribe, still fighting their endless wars of survival.

They docked with the attack frigate *Kva,* and were soon in the practice cages, circling one another just as they had done in the Fang's halls for so many years. The Grey Hunter Varak Stonejaw had gone with them as sergeant and mentor on this first mission, a dour veteran of the company who would no doubt rather have been fighting with his own comrades and pressing the case for elevation to the Wolf Guard. He drove them hard, making the long conditioning sessions as gruelling as anything undertaken under the Mountain. In the six weeks of warp travel, every one of the Blooded Claws picked up scars, and the rawest of the insolence was beaten out of them, and they slowly began to resemble a true pack.

They reached their destination earlier than scheduled – the giant agri world of Pholeses X, and were drilled into their armour and took up their blades. All the pack carried their chainswords save for Varak, who took a straight-bladed power sword, and Haldor, who bore his axe.

The frigate anchored over the northern continent, and the hangar

bays slammed open. The pack's Thunderhawks burned out into the void, the warriors within gripping the restraint cages as the dizzying descent began.

Momentum built around them, shaking the metal panels. As the floor juddered and clanged, Haldor felt the first stirrings of the kill-urge, and he began to whoop with the start of the frenzy. The rest of the pack joined in, building themselves into a pitch of raw excitement. This was the moment, the first test of the faith placed in them.

The gunship burned down into the atmosphere, its nose rising and its turbofans whining into life. The crew-bay doors crunched back, and the smell and noise of the first alien world rushed in.

The sky was green, more green than anything Haldor had ever seen on Fenris. Everything stank – of foliage, of dark earth, of the nitro-fertilisers, of the colossal hoppers rammed with grain, of the spores floating through the hot air. The landscape ahead of them was thick with crops, stretching away to an empty horizon and marked only by the sentinel watch towers placed kilometres apart.

But they were not alone. The fields before them had been trampled down by a huge mass of bellowing, snorting greenskins, rampaging through the mud and destroying all before them. There must have been thousands of them, a living wave of virulent, mindless fury, swarming from horizon to horizon, their stench pungent and their noise incredible. Imperial troops, mortals in dirt-brown uniforms, were trying to hold them, and doing badly. Las-fire zipped across the scene of carnage, answered by a deafening barrage of heavy projectile fire and the spittle-laced bellows of counter-challenge.

It was overwhelming. It was a sensory overload.

It was *fantastic*.

Haldor leapt from the hovering Thunderhawk with his pack-mates, screaming out in both rage and joy, swinging his axe in his

right hand while firing his bolter from the left. They crunched down to earth, their boots sinking deep into the thick soil, and charged into the heart of the fighting, Varak leading them with mighty sword-swipes, the Blooded Claws sprinting to keep pace, to engage the enemy, to bring the wrath of Fenris to the xenos, and to fight with all the fury and the brilliance that their gene-heritage had given them.

That was only another beginning.

Valgarn did not return from that battle, his back broken by the greenskins as he attempted to bring down their champion, but the slaughter was great, and when the blood was sinking into the earth they were still singing of it, laughing from exhaustion and from exhilaration. The fighting was all good on Pholeses, and against an enemy that was more beast than any other.

From there, the *Kva* took them to other worlds. In those days the battles were against the xenos, for the Great Enemy had been hounded back into the Eye of Terror and the marks of the Warmaster scraped from the records of the Imperium. The pack hunted hard, never resting, always seeking the next combat. It became like a drug, a need, buried deep in their marrow and never letting them rest. When they were not fighting they were training. Varak kept them in line, breaking heads when he needed to, and despite it all they learned from him, adding guile to their energy and tactics to their headlong charges.

After that first campaign tour, they returned to Fenris, now two down from their original complement, and their armour was re-conditioned and their weapons sharpened in the forges. The Fang was, as ever, largely empty, its tunnels echoing and lined with frost, though more aspirants had been taken in, and Brannak kept as close a watch over them as before. The pack did not linger, and nor did

they wish to, for once the wider sea of stars had been opened up to them, then their wanderlust became powerful. They were given more tasks, and drawn more closely into the company, and the battles became longer and more bloody.

The weeks turned to months, and the months turned to years, only marked by the endless procession of wars. Though the Imperium itself had never been stronger, and the glory of the first days of the Great Crusade was in part reignited by the Astra Militarum and its teeming trillions, the enemies never went away. The Claws' pelts began to lose their vivid red, bleaching out to grey. Varak left them, claiming solemnly that they would all be dead within the year, and those who remained took the mantle of Hunters, and reached for new weapons and gained new kill-marks for their armour.

Eventually even old Aeska died, his end coming in the depths of the hulk *Cataclysm of Faith,* fighting an enemy that they had thought gone forever. The pyres burned long for him on Fenris, but there was little time to mourn, for punitive strikes were ordered to bring vengeance for the desecration. Haldor, now the master of his pack of six, answered the call, and the *Kva* burned out into the void again, this time in the vanguard of a combined fleet from answering Chapters.

In later years Imperial savants would see such battles as the revived stirrings of the Archenemy, slowly gathering strength as the wounds of the Scouring were healed. At the time, this was not known, and the hope still lingered that the taint of Horus could be extinguished entirely.

At the battlefront, for those facing the horrors brought to humanity by the *Cataclysm of Faith,* that hope soon withered. Among the twisted and the degenerate creatures that spilled out of the hulk's shadow were fighters of the old III Legion, still wearing the purple-and-gold, though even more mutated and debased than

that armour had been at the close of the Great Heresy. There was no joy in fighting such foes. At the end of every encounter the Grey Hunters would count the cost, their pleasure in the kill replaced with implacable fury. When the sagas were sung around the fires, it was done to remember, not to celebrate.

More long years dragged past, and the campaign ground towards its conclusion. Other Chapters joined the struggle, adding their blades and their doctrines to those who had been first to heed the call. Ultramarines came, and White Scars, and then their successors, all with different liveries, their Gothic spoken in a score of accents.

The final encounter came on the desert world of Iela, when the enemy had at last been broken and harried back into the void. Haldor made planetfall on the plains before the great hab-spires, rising up through the sand-haze and into a twin-sunned sky. Soon those spires would be burning again as the Imperium took back what had been despoiled, but before the assault could begin, one task remained. It was not something he had done before, and the prospect gave him a mix of feelings, none straightforward.

So he stood amid the swirling dust, his pearl-grey armour already stained matte. His pack-mates stood some way back, a loose ring, far enough away not to intervene but close enough to jeer if he shamed them.

Ahead of him were ten Dark Angels. Nine stood back, mirroring his own battle-brothers, leaving one to face him.

The squad sergeant called himself Otho. His forest-green battleplate was finely wrought, and he carried a long-bladed zweihander. He had, so he claimed, bested sons of Russ in two previous honour-duels, and looked forward to making the tally three.

Haldor stood loosely, his axe in his right hand. He knew he should be concentrating, studying the way that his opponent carried

himself to look for the advantage, but his mind kept roving back to the night, years ago now, under the Mountain. He could still hear the voice of his primarch, hoarse with grief, relating the tale of the first and greatest duel. Had Russ even known that the practice had kept going? Is that what he had wanted?

'You look untested,' said Otho, breaking into Haldor's thoughts.

There it was, just as Russ had described it – the arrogance, the assumption of superiority. Otho's words immediately riled him, and he found his blood rising to it.

'This axe has cut plenty.'

Otho looked at it. 'That is a Legion blade,' he said, and a faint whirr gave away that his lenses had zoomed in close. 'How do you come to bear it? You do not deserve the weapon, and you cannot know its heritage.'

At that, Haldor laughed out loud. For all his life he had suffered people telling him that, treating him like some ignorant baresark from the ice.

And yet, he knew all about it. He had heard the tale verbatim from the mouth of a living god, one who had walked the ramparts of the Imperial Palace with the Allfather, who had broken the traitor Magnus and who had driven the Warmaster's rabble screaming back to the Eye. Even now he could still see that scarred face, streaked with ash, softly telling the saga of the Lion and Wolf under the Fang's shadow, ensuring that it would never be lost in the only way the skjalds of the Rout ever did.

I don't want it forgotten, Leman Russ had told him.

Haldor hunkered down for the first strike, finally gaining the concentration he needed. He would win this one. He would see the Dark Angel broken on the dust before the sunset, for now he understood the ritual, and what it meant, and why it had to continue.

'This?' Haldor asked. 'This is the blade of Captain Alajos of the

Ninth Order of the First Legion. Then it was named *Urthand*, the hate-forged, and your champion had carried it for half a century of war. In the Crimson Fortress of Dulan it was taken from him, seized by the mightiest warrior to ever walk under sun and star, and he took it up, and its name was changed to *Wyrdfast*, the fate-caught. And in time it came to me, given freely to mark the new blood of a new age, and I have carried it across worlds to slay in the name of the Wolf King.'

Haldor was grinning now, his every muscle singing, and Otho could sense it, for he had taken his guard.

'For it was always his,' said Haldor, advancing, choosing the moment. 'Even now, it still remains his. He raised it against the Lord of Angels, and it broke his spirit just as it broke his battle-plate.'

He couldn't stop smiling.

'So ready yourself, son of the Lion,' he said, poised to begin the cycle again. 'This thing knows how to break you too.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chris Wraight is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *The Path of Heaven* and *Scars*, the novella *Brotherhood of the Storm* and the audio drama *The Sigillite*. For Warhammer 40,000 he has written the Space Wolves novels *Blood of Asaheim* and *Stormcaller*, and the short story collection *Wolves of Fenris*, as well as the Space Marine Battles novels *Wrath of Iron* and *Battle of the Fang*. Additionally, he has many Warhammer novels to his name, including the Time of Legends novel *Master of Dragons*, which forms part of the War of Vengeance series. Chris lives and works near Bristol, in south-west England.

An extract from Corax: Lord of Shadows.

EXTRACT
GUY HALEY
CORAX
LORD OF SHADOWS

Roboute Guilliman neared his brother's hiding place. He didn't need to see him to know it. His brother's presence prickled the hair on the nape of his neck, the sensation prey felt before the killing bite. Guilliman was wary. He had won, but he could still fall. In the shattered grand concert hall, shadows were everywhere.

His brother was lord of the shadows. This was his kingdom.

Stepping carefully over a pile of bodies oozing life fluids, he aimed the Arbitrator upwards, towards the top of a shattered column. Often, his brother attacked from above. Darkness and height defined his ambush technique. There was nothing there. He moved on.

'Your armies are scattered,' Guilliman boomed. 'Your worlds are taken. Your last fortress burns. Do you yield, brother?'

The faintest hiss of air was the only warning Guilliman got of the attack. His brother leapt from a shadowed corner of the broken floor above. Black

space took on human shape and dived at him. Guilliman pivoted and leant back to dodge a cruelly curved set of claws aimed at his helm.

‘A perfect decapitation strike!’ Guilliman said admiringly. ‘Narrowly evaded.’

His brother went into a roll and sprang up to his feet. Unlike Guilliman, he was unarmoured, clad in charcoal-black from head to toe, his face smeared with the ashes of his empire. A small chest-plate of ceramite was his only physical defence; the rest came down to stealth and guile. It was a strategy that had almost worked.

Almost wins no wars.

Guilliman’s brother attacked again. The claws mounted on the back of his hand fizzled with disruptive energies. Even in full sight he was hard to see. He moved with such staggering speed his motion blurred.

‘Yield! You have lost!’ shouted Guilliman. He had no wish to hurt his brother, but his opponent came on regardless.

Claws whistled around the XIII primarch, jabbing one moment, slashing the next, always in motion, presenting a wall of adamantium. Guilliman left his sword sheathed, dodged the blows and retreated, waiting for the right moment to strike.

It was a small window of opportunity, a fraction of a second where the chest-plate was unprotected by either claw. Without conscious thought Guilliman reacted to the opening, punching forward hard.

The Hand of Dominion flared with the release of power. Guilliman's brother flew backwards, the chest-plate left broken and smoking by the blow of the power fist. He slammed into the wall, and fell to the rubble covering the ground.

'You are beaten, brother. Yield.'

The figure sprawled on the floor stared up at him, his black eyes unreadable. His body radiated tension as he gathered himself to spring.

Guilliman planted a boot gently upon his shattered breastplate, forcing the other primarch back down.

‘Do not attempt to rise. You are beaten,’ he said.

The figure relaxed, and sprawled.

‘Do you yield?’ Guilliman repeated.

The figure considered. The sounds of gunfire outside the grand hall were popping away to nothing. Flights of aircraft screaming through the sky no longer unleashed their ordnance. Black eyes strayed to the dead littering the hall.

The war was over.

‘I yield,’ said Corvus Corax.

Guilliman smiled. ‘Good.’ He removed his boot. ‘End simulation!’ Guilliman called. ‘Authority prime.’

A machine answered back.

Voice print acknowledged. Roboute Guilliman, thirteenth primarch, progenitor of Ultramarines Legion. Simulation ending.

The unpleasant electricity of the strategio-simulacra buzzed through the back of Guilliman's skull. Like an ice sculpture melting under a fusion beam, the battlefield dissolved. Segments of cogitator-spun dreams dripped away, revealing reality behind. There was a moment of disconnect. According to his subjective perceptions, Guilliman was standing and armoured. It took a moment to recognise the recumbent figure lying on the couch next to Corax as himself.

Prepare for reintegration, droned the machine. A necessary warning.

Guilliman's sense of location underwent a dramatic shift. It took an act of will not to open his eyes and draw a drowning man's panicked breath. Corax, who had used the strategio-simulacra fewer times, barely managed to maintain his dignity. His limbs flailed about before stilling.

'Your reaction to the machine is improving. You are becoming accustomed,' said Guilliman. His voice croaked. His extremities tingled. Being immersed did odd things to the body.

Corax opened his eyes. Their complete blackness gave him a faintly alien air.

‘I dislike the disconnect, but the cognitive dissonance is lessening,’ said Corax. He sat up on the immersion couch and pulled the magnetic cradle from his head. ‘Though I see no reason to repeat this exercise. I think now you have the measure of me. There is probably nothing more you can learn from my techniques.’

‘You beat me three times,’ said Guilliman. ‘A feat few have managed.’

‘Three from twenty,’ said Corax. ‘You learn very quickly.’ He stretched his arms and grimaced. ‘Those were my best strategies. You countered them all.’

Guilliman stood. His limbs too were stiff. ‘The strategio-simulacra is an amazing machine. I have never experienced anything so convincing. Our ancestors must have struggled not to lose themselves in these devices, but for all its wonders it does weaken the body.’ He held out his hand to his brother. ‘It is a marvellous toy, and will be a

useful tool, but it is not entirely healthy. If you wish to call an end to our exercise, I am willing.'

'I do. Perhaps it is for the best there are no more examples surviving.' Corax took the offered hand without rancour. Defeat had not embittered him. Guilliman pulled him to his feet.

'I am sure our father's scientists or the tech-lords of Mars will unlock the simulacra's secrets soon enough,' said Guilliman. 'A new age of enlightenment is upon us. The secrets of the ancients will be ours again. One day, maybe every Legion will have its like. If one ignores its drawbacks, we can see that it is kinder to the mind than a hypnomat, and allows the consciousness to interact fully with the lessons, preserving a man's self-determination and therefore allowing faster learning. We must make mistakes in order to learn, after all.'

Corax glanced around at the machine and the silent men tending to its needs. It was something from the lost Ages of Technology, retrieved by Guilliman on one of his campaigns. In its original format it would probably have been smaller, but the Imperial

technologies that had restored it to full function rendered it enormous. Its mechanisms encompassed the room they were in within thick, complicated walls; everything, all the operating stations, connection points, medical devices and the two dozen immersion couches at its centre, were inside the device. Whistling coils and banks of clattering cogitators extended to fill most of the ship's hold where it was kept.

'I would be careful with it. It is good some of the old knowledge was lost. I am sure this false reality holds its own evils.'

'Perhaps,' Guilliman allowed. 'But we are wiser now than before Old Night, and when the Imperium is complete, nothing shall be impossible. Now, perhaps you will join me for further discussion this evening? I have matters to attend to that cannot wait.'

'I have several things to see to myself. Fresh orders from Terra. I must begin preparations to leave.'

'We will be parting ways soon,' said Guilliman regretfully.

Corax nodded. He had a grim little smile. It looked pained. He laughed sincerely enough, but smiling seemed to come hard to him. A side effect of a childhood behind bars, Guilliman thought.

‘This evening then, my brother,’ said Corax. ‘I look forward to it.’

Click here to buy Corax: Lord of Shadows.

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To Hannah, with love.

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